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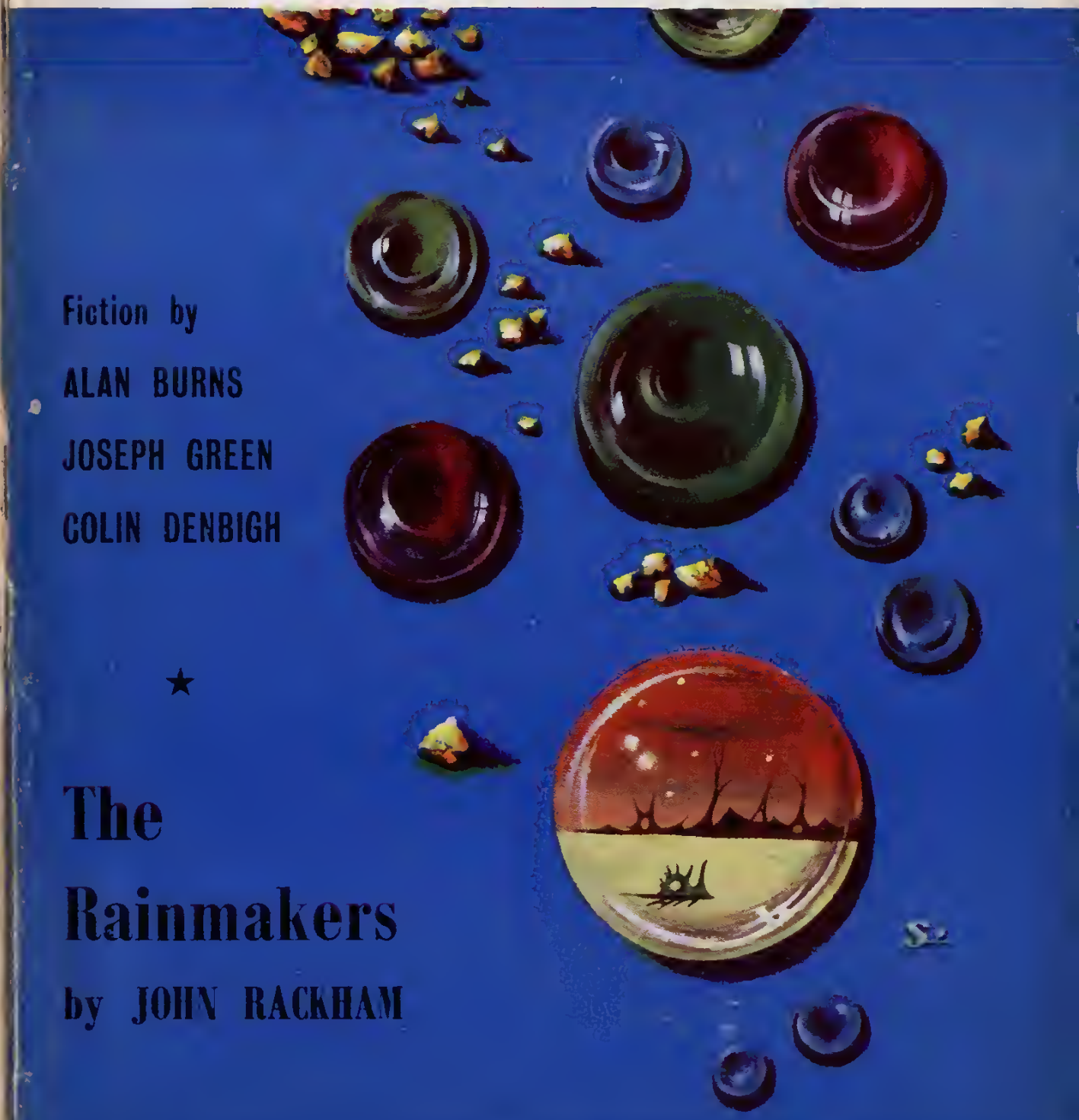
Maclaren House, 131 Great Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

A Nova Science Fiction Magazine

No. 30 2/6 VOLUME 5



Fiction by

ALAN BURNS

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★

The Rainmakers

by JOHN RACKHAM

VOLUME 5 No. 30 SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES ALL COMPLETE STORIES

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 5 No. 30

1962

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Cover painting by SINGLETON

Published bi-monthly by NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD., Maclaren House, 131 Great Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1 Tel. : HOP. 5712

Sole Agents for Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd.

Sole Agents for North America : Gordon & Gotch (Canada) Ltd.

Annual Subscription 17/- post free (6 issues)

North America $3.00

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Printed in England by The Rugby Advertiser Ltd., Albert Street, Rugby 1/63

Mars was an arid planet, gasping for water, but the colonists found that there was one place in the solar system from which huge quantities of it could be easily transported—providing the spaceship crews were tough enough.

THE RAINMAKERS

by JOHN RACKHAM

Chapter One

Marsh Hellman sat, solidly and completely at ease, giving almost all his attention to the pleasant business of loading his pipe. This time of comfort wouldn't last much longer, and he meant to make the most of it. Soon, now, the P.A. would announce final clearances, and yet another trip would begin. There would be time enough to worry about that when it happened. Right now, with a good sleep behind him, a good meal inside him, and bathed and clean from the skin out, he felt ready for the trials ahead. Across the table from him sat his engineer, Barney Logan, nursing the remains of a double whisky plus its own volume of pure orange juice. Barney had the naive belief that alcohol was less intoxicating, taken that way. Hellman knew better, and a fraction of his attention went to making sure that Barney didn't order any more. He did not intend to add to his hazards by relying on a fuddled power-man. Around them both hung the subdued clink and chatter of the lounge of Rainbow Base.

His pipe going sweetly, Hellman let his thoughts wander idly over the strenuous history of Operation Rainbow. He had been in on it right from the start, which made him a near-legend. Even more amazingly, he still enjoyed the struggle

and the hazards, and that made him unique. He knew this, not with conceit, not even with pride, but as a dispassionate appraisal of fact, as was his habit of mind. Logan, now, he was the jittery type. Not afraid, exactly, but inclined to be edgy. More so than usual, this trip. Looked to the drink to calm his nerves, but it was merely making them more obvious. Fourth trip, for him, and he wouldn't last out many more, by the signs. A pity, that. Good crew-men were getting harder to find every day now.

Hellman swivelled his thoughts, for a moment, to his other man, Jacko Collins, astrogator. Young, improbably handsome and irrepressibly happy-go-lucky, without a nerve in his make-up. A ' natural ' math mind and a brilliant astrogator. No danger of any crack-up there. But Jacko was irresponsible, couldn't stick long at any one job. Hellman shook his head in gentle worry. Man-power, that was the one weak link in the whole grand structure of the operation. And it was a grand structure, no doubt about that.

Like almost every other imagination-staggering endeavour undertaken by Man, this one had begun small. Its basic drive was a simple, heartfelt wish. ' If only it could rain ! ' The first hardy and determined settlers on Mars dug in their roots and planted their defences in full awareness of what they were in for. On the deficit side, they had reckoned on cold, on a slim atmosphere, on all the routine hardships of striking a new and unfamiliar terrain. They had anticipated aridity. On the credit side, they came prepared with wit, skill, artifice and device—and determination, because Mars offered riches. There were rare and valuable minerals not too hard to find. There was the favourable gravity-field. There was room to grow. And the dusty, bone-dry soil was incredibly fertile, if you gave it enough water. You could count on tamed fusion-power, and its multi-motored slaves, to lift the cracking burden of labour. With that power, too, you could sweat water out of chemicals, molecule by grudging molecule. And Mars could bloom, and repay, handsomely.

It did. It drank your water, thirstily, all you could make, and thrived. You learned to be thrifty, even miserly, with water. You discovered how to be ingenious with the niggardly thin crust of ice that formed in the Polar regions in the long cold winter. And you managed. You even got rich. But there was never enough water. In time, it became liquid life,

more precious than its own weight in gold, so esteemed that it seemed wrong to just drink it. And there was never, at any time, enough of it.

Those original settlers had known, academically, that it would be like this. But the reality was another thing entirely. To Man, water in quantity is a way of life. Even in the middle of the most arid desert on Earth, a man knew that there was water, great acres of it, if he could only get to it. He could always count on dampness, if it was only dew. And there were, always, great fleecy puffs of cloud, to reassure. On Mars, there was nothing of that. Instead, like an ever-present insatiable hunger, was the knowledge that there wasn't *any* water, *anywhere*, that wasn't already earmarked and allocated, down to the last drop. Even the sons and daughters of the original colonists grew up with that instinctive yearning for water.

The colony grew and throve, became big enough to fragment into many self-regulating units, to spread out. As a whole, Mars brought riches, but it was an open secret that many of the richer pioneers had been known to spend the price of a round-trip ticket, as tourists, to go back to Earth, for nothing more than the bliss of being able to stand in the rain, to stare at the dash and surge of sea waves on a beach, or to sit, and fish and dream by a river, just once more.

And then, out of an otherwise unremarkable routine report, turned in by a survey ship combing the asteroid belt, an item came to the sharp eyes of someone with more imagination than most. In the 2.8 A.U. belt, a few seconds of orbit ahead of Vesta, a mass of tumbled, jagged, shapeless—ice ! Estimated gross mass, seven hundred and fifty megatons. Ice, at that distance and in that company, was nothing more than a curiosity, an odd item, to the survey-ship. To a hastily-convened meeting of the leading citizens of Mars, it strongly resembled a gold-mine in the sky. As far as this, the issue was still a simple one. There, free for the taking, was ice. Millions of tons of it. Just one, or two, maybe, of those million of tons, as water, would make all the difference. The prospect made an immediate appeal, conjured up alluring pictures. Water. Moist air. Clouds. Rain ! And, if solid excuse was needed to justify a sheer wish-fulfilment urge, the material rewards would be immense. Apart from the multiplied bounty from the soil, cloud cover would help to hoard the

parsimonious heat from the distant sun by day, and lessen the icy leakage away into space every bitter night.

The issue was simple, and the decision never in doubt. The ice would be, *must* be, taken, and brought home to Mars. But from that moment on, the project was to swell and strain every skill and resource the water-hungry colonists could muster. For a start, there would have to be a base, self-contained and anchored, actually on the ice-field itself. It was built, outfitted, and equipped. It had stores, supplies, comforts, spares, machine-shops, fuel, and a highly skilled staff of technicians, astrogators, computers and programmers, observers—and complex machinery to facilitate the whole operation. They called it Rainbow Base, as a fine gesture to the more attractive aspect of the enterprise. But the bleak, dark, remote ice-field was a poor place for gestures and despite all the wit and artifice, it never became more than bearable, something to be endured for as brief a time as contracts would allow. The major evil was the ice itself. Shot through by every conceivable kind of cosmic radiation and adulterated with the metallic dust-sweepings of millions of orbiting years, it laid down a constant barrage of electronic interference that made sophisticated radio virtually useless. You could use, and depend on, a non-modulated guide-beam; you could punch a morse message through to Mars, if you used megawatts of power, and the conditions were favourable. For the rest, Rainbow was as isolated as if it had been a mid-ocean island in the days before steam. Even within the complex of the station itself, distant communication was restricted to wire, coaxial wiring, from one telephone to another.

Salaries were high, but the rate of personnel turn-over was higher. The average contract-period was three years, and only the persistent desire for rain kept replacements coming in to fill the ranks. It was a job to saw the nerves and fret the soul.

Cheek-by-jowl with it went another major headache, the business of ferrying the ice itself. This was the fundamental, the brass-tacks hard-work part, and, to realise it, the Rain-maker fleet was built. When it is a question of changing an orbit, the basic requirement is ' thrust.' Rockets never did function really well as flying devices, not until the exploitation of the fourth law of motion produced the gravity-modifier.

With the perfection of G-M, the rocket-principle could be employed in its true function, as a means of steering and control, and space-flight became prosaic. But when it comes to sheer brute thrust-power in open space, there is nothing that performs anything like as well as a rocket. So the Rainmakers were designed to pack the maximum possible thrust-potential for the longest practical period, with such matters as grace, comfort, or flying efficiency relegated to second place.

In shape they resembled, more than anything else, a squat beer-bottle with a blunt spike for a cork. The forty-five foot body, ten feet in diameter, was tanks of fuel, pumps, engines and blast vents, with the bare minimum of space set aside for communication shaft, mess-deck, midship air-lock and power-deck controls. In the neck and spike were the camera-eyes, arc-lights and sensors, all securely recessed in the hull. Here, and here only, that hull was plate upon plate of toughened armour-steel, interleaved with layer after layer of highly resilient metal sponge. Inside, like a shrivelled kernel in an unbreakable nut, was the brain of the ship, the control-cell, with barely room for the captain and the astrogator, and the all-important instrumentation. Around the squat stern, like a spiky dog-collar, was a multitude of minor vents, the attitude-jets.

A Rainmaker could shove like hell. It could spin on its own axis, in any direction, and manoeuvre like a fox shaking the hounds. But it was an immense, awkward, ungainly, barging beast in free-flight.

In theory, the job was simple enough. Given a hunk of ice, and your figures from the astrogator to tell you just where, and in what direction, to shove—you aimed, rammed in your ice-pick nose, and shoved. And thus you started the ice into its long, curving, dwindling spiral. And you went along with it, giving it a discreetly correcting nudge from time to time, for a trip that could be as short as eighteen days, or as long as twenty-four, depending on orbital relationships in the starting phase. In theory, it was straightforward. In practice, it became a nightmare.

One Rainmaker could handle a block of ice the approximate mass-equivalent of one kiloton. To deliver this, a special ice-cutter had been designed, a great spidery crab-clawed monster, with near-zero manoeuvrability, but a fantastic amount of thrust-power for brief bursts, and equipped with a

' knife,' a lightmaser with a multi-megawatt backing. It put out a coherent light-beam that could slice chunks from the ice-pack as easily as a wire bites through cheese. It was there to carve out the cargo, in one-kiloton chunks, for the ships to take away. They built ten ships. They planned one trip per one ship, per Mars year, to be operated during times of most favourable opposition. In theory. In the first year, R.M.3 and R.M.7 failed to arrive. In the second year it was R.M.2. In the register, in Mars H.Q., it was ' missing, believed lost.' In the third year none failed. Seven went out and seven came home. But there was little to be jubilant about. Four entire crews resigned, and the remainder were grim.

They were discovering, the hard way, that no two ice-bergs were alike. No two trips were alike, either. This was not the kind of operation where you could become expert. Practice did not make perfect. Every trip was likely to be just as unpredictably hazardous as the first one. And they had no way of knowing, for certain, what had happened on those missing ships—why they had failed, where they had gone wrong, or anything.

By the tenth year, Mars could boast wispy clouds, a measurable humidity, even a dew. The planet was beginning to bloom, timidly. But the price had been high. Only three of the original ten Rainmakers remained. Salaries had tripled, and where it had been one trip, annually, it was now three. Three times the reward per trip, and three times as many trips, but crewmen were harder and harder to come by. The operation was far from complete. If it ceased at this point, it could be written off as a gigantic fiasco. To give up, now, was unthinkable, after all the effort, the struggle, the ingenuity. But no amount of expertise, or skill, can build men to order. The best you can do is select the best there is available. Men like Marsh Hellman, for example, are rare, in any society.

As he sat, placidly, puffing his pipe, he could have doubled for a typical Norseman out of legend. Sturdy and solid in build, blue eyes as clear and level as the sea he had never seen, smooth-faced except for the hair-line squint-wrinkles edging his eyes, his expression was that of a man sublimely confident in his ability to grasp and deal with whatever might happen next. Across from him, Logan suddenly drained his glass and turned to raise his finger for a refill. Hellman sighed and spoke.

" No, Barney. That's enough !" Logan's face clouded in momentary objection, then his expression shifted into an awkward grin.

" Maybe you're right," he said. " I'm jumpy, this time. It's the waiting. It always gets me." He glanced at the lounge clock, at his watch, and wriggled. " Waiting—time seems to hang !"

" Forget it," Hellman advised. " Look over there. Mike McQuaid, by the bar. He's cutting for us. It's his trick. He'll get the word a good ten minutes ahead of us. Relax !" But Logan couldn't.

" That McQuaid," he sneered. " The great lady-killer. He's got a hell of a shock coming, did he but know. I've a damned good mind to tell him just to see his face go sour." " What ?" Hellman wondered, mildly, but Logan didn't wait to answer. On his feet, the rash impulse grown into purpose, he crossed the quiet room. Hellman watched him go, not anxious yet, but watchful. Logan was bull-like and heavy. By contrast, McQuaid looked frail, but his stance was lean, his face dark and intent, and he had a name for vicious striking power. The immediate tension between the two was almost tangible. Hellman readied, instinctively. Wire-taut nerves were common-place here. Caution, precaution and rigid adherence to rules meant the difference between life and death, often, but when a man is well a 'glow with liquor and crackling with nervous tension, it doesn't take much to push him into folly. He came up out of his chair urgently and was across the room with deceptive speed just in time to knock down Logan's heavy fist.

" You'll never hit a damn thing, so long as you telegraph your punches as obviously as that," he said coldly. McQuaid had anticipated the blow, too.

" Ah now," he straightened out of his crouch, " why didn't you let the dumb cluck take a swing at me, then ? Why spoil the fun I'd have bashing his teeth down his lying throat ?"

" Cool off !" Hellman warned him, taking an iron grip on Logan's wrist. " You too, Barney. This is no time to pick a fight, you fool. Save it !"

" All right," Logan growled. " It'll keep. When I'm settled in, McQuaid, I'll send you my address. *After* the wedding. Just call round, and we'll see who's lying, *and* just who knocks who's teeth in !"

Hellman applied leverage, to send Logan back a step, up against the little crowd of eager onlookers. He let go just in time to catch a blur of movement from McQuaid. Split seconds later, so that no-one saw quite how it was done, McQuaid was bent back across the bar-rail, with Hellman's right arm grinding into his throat so that he fought to breathe.

" I told you to cool off," he said, icily. " Now do it or I'll throw you in the brig. I can always request another cutter, but I can't get another powerman. I need Logan, right now. Save your battles for another day." He released his rigid arm, swung on Logan, and marched him back to the table. The P.A. sounded, suddenly, and an impersonal voice announced.

" Ice-cutter away. Ice-cutter away. Pick up transport at Exit Five. At Exit Five." Hellman saw McQuaid massage his throat, catch up his helmet, and go stalking out. He turned to Logan.

" Now," he said, evenly, " What the hell was all that about? You and your home address and weddings? Have you finally fixed it up with that sister of Jacko's—what's her name—Janet ?"

" That's right !" Logan nodded, his sudden anger melting at the thought. " We fixed it all definitely, last night, just after we got in "

" You mutton-head. We get a twenty-four hour stopover because we need the rest and the refreshment, to see us through the trip ahead—not so that you can waste it making marriage vows. I wonder how much sleep you got ?"

" Once won't hurt," Logan said, defensively. " And this was special. A man doesn't fix to get married every day, damn it. Trouble with you is you don't have any feelings. But some woman will make a monkey out of you, some day."

" That's a pretty poor compliment to Janet Collins," Hellman said. " As for feelings, the only one I have right now is disgust. What with the whisky, and no sleep last night, you're in a hell of a state to con a power-deck. I should've let McQuaid take you apart."

" Him ? That'll be the day. I could eat three like him before breakfast. And you don't have to worry about me, Marsh. I can run that waggonload of old iron with my eyes shut."

" That's no brag, either. That's a prediction," Hellman sat back in his seat, resignedly. He was not really worried. Logan

was good, a first-class man at his job. And if he suffered from lack of proper rest, that was his hard luck. But Hellman didn't like things that went wrong because of stupidity. Failures, breakdowns, even accidents, were all part of the game, and he could accept them as legitimate hazards. It was the irrational human factor which worried him — because he never felt able to handle it. People were queer, odd, unpredictable things. He preferred machinery every time. An implication occurred to him.

" This will be your last trip, then ?"

" That's right," Logan nodded, regretfully. "I'm sorry, in some ways. It's been rough, now and then—but I'll miss it !"

" Forget that stuff," Hellman grinned. " You're doing the right thing, for you. It's no life for a married man, anyway. And you worry too much," he sucked on his pipe a moment or two. " Why the devil didn't you say something earlier ?"

" Didn't want to dwell too much on that ' last trip ' angle. That's bad luck, you know that."

" Pity you didn't think of it before you decided to spill it all to McQuaid, then. Still . . ." and he let the thought go as a picture of Janet Collins came to mind. He had seen her a time or two, and he didn't blame Logan in the least for being enchanted. Twin-sister to Jacko, she shared his attractive cast of features, but on her they were enough to make any susceptible man break into a warm glow. With that, she had her brother's inborn gift for mathematics, and was employed in the Base navigation and computation section.

The P.A. sounded again, tinnily. " Attention, R.M.IV crew—R.M.IV crew— your craft is now ready and cleared to proceed. Pick up transport from Exit 3—from Exit 3 "

" McQuaid is just a rat," Logan grunted, reaching for his helmet. " He won't be any trouble to anybody."

" Don't count on it," Hellman cautioned. " He's twice as fast as you are, and he has a bad name. That sort will wait for you in a dark corner, as often as not. *I* wouldn't care to trust him at my back, anyway."

" All I hope is he comes round to call, when I'm a groundside citizen," Logan declared, as they reached the exit. " I'll rough him up good. Beats me how he ever got the nerve to fancy he had any chance with Janet !" They clipped on their helmets, bringing the conversation to a halt, as they passed into the lock.

Chapter Two

The pilot, ready astride the waiting space-sled, watched them climb aboard and snap belt buckles to the frame. The outer door cycled open. At their nod, he kicked the catapult-release and they were shot out into the dark void. Below, past the slender stays on which the Base stood, lay the vast grey-white wilderness of the ice-field. Down there, too, was the great unlovely hulk of R.M.IV. The pilot glanced down, rapped switches, and the sled stuttered fire, surged into a down-dropping swoop, to brake to a standstill alongside the air-lock. Hellman swung by one hand to lean across and slap the door switch. The gleaming circle of metal fell back, became a dark hole. He stepped across, felt Logan follow. They turned to thumb-up the pilot, saw him return the gesture and dart away on a pencil of fire. As soon as the lock was up to pressure, they unclipped their helmets again, to step through into the ship.

" I've just thought," Hellman said. " If you'd spoken earlier, *you* could have gone across to Comp for the course-data, instead of Jacko. Then you'd have had a chance of a last word with Janet."

" I already thought of that," Logan muttered, aggrievedly, " but that Jacko, he had other ideas. All mysterious and secretive—but who is he fooling? He has his eye on some woman or other over there, you can bet."

" That's one bet you'd never get me to take you on," Hellman laughed. " Ever know the time when Jacko *didn't* have his eye on some woman?"

" It doesn't matter much, anyway. Janet will follow in the very next relief-ship. It's all fixed." He slapped the metal bulkhead, feelingly. " I'd better go power-up."

" Right. Give me atti-jet availability, soon as you can." Hellman tucked his helmet under his arm, watched Logan disappear into the shaft, and followed him, but heading in the opposite direction, bow-wards to control. Once settled in his seat, he began checking his board. Clusters of red signals winked on, as Logan loaded up the fusion unit. Lights, gravi-mod, comm, atmosphere-plant, radio, servos and trip circuits closing-supply—secondary fire-power. The needles jumped and settled, screens came alive as the cameras warmed up. The gravi-mod knitted everything into a comforting ' up ' and

'down' relationship. Nursing the controls, Hellman lifted the ship, sent it drifting and turning, in line with a mark-beam from the distant cutter.

Now, in the sprinkle of starlight, he could see the cutter-light, and then the iceberg it was straddling. By reflex he drifted his ship towards it, studying the chunk of ice that was to be in his charge for the next three weeks or so.

"Cutter to R.M.IV," McQuaid's voice came through the chatter of static. "All ready for you. See you don't drop it?"

"I see it," Hellman acknowledged, absently, ignoring the sarcasm. His lip curled as he studied the pictures the camera brought him. McQuaid had let his humiliation bite deep, apparently. He had selected a free-floating berg all of two and a half kilotons, and sliced it in half along the worst possible axis. The outcome was a shape something like what you'd get if you chopped an egg in half through its longest axis. It was going to be a swine to handle—and it was a good deal more than the maximum one-kiloton, too. Hellman had seen and handled enough ice to be able to estimate size almost as accurately as the cutter's mass-sensory instruments. He killed the radio, flipped the intercom.

"You shouldn't have needled McQuaid, Barney," he said, evenly. "He's sorted out a real bastard for us, this time."

"Hey, Marsh!" Logan's voice came shrill as his jitters leaped into high gear. "Don't take any fool chances, will you?"

"Relax!" Hellman was curt. "Have you ever known me take any kind of risk? We can always lose a chunk of this one once we're clear."

He cut the intercom and went back to radio as he persuaded his ungainly craft to approach the gap between the two halves of the berg. The grey haze of boiled-off molecular ice where the light-beam had carved glittered in the beam of his nose arc-lights. That gap was barely wide enough to permit entry. McQuaid was really being awkward. A good man on the cutter could usually be counted on to give the chunk a hefty push-off, just to make it a bit easier for the ship. But not McQuaid. That damned human factor again. Hellman grinned, coldly, aimed his ship for the gap, and jockeyed her ahead, gently.

He knew that once inside, the gap would widen. That was experience. Sudden-boiled ice, under pressure by being

trapped in the heart of the berg, generates its own erosive force, gouges a shallow hollow between the two walls. Sure enough, as the ship slid in, the grey-green surfaces fell away on either side. He kept a keen eye on the face that concerned him looking for a likely spot. Snow-dust was blizzard-thick, here, but he could see the great jagged ice-wall plain enough. Estimating himself roughly half-way, he slowed. About here—a depression, a fault, a pocket—anything helpful? Ah. There! He spun the ship end-for-end, lined up on that dark patch, got it steady. He pushed the 'stand-by-to-ram' alarm, counted three, and sent the ship lunging forward. The prow dug in, spearing its way deep. His harness checked him, pulled him back into his seat. He cut the drive, watched his dancing indicators shiver back to steadiness. All systems were still 'go'. He flipped the intercom again.

"Power-deck?"

"Check, here. Everything 'go'." Logan's voice was still thick with nerves. "Now we have to wait for Jacko, damn it!"

Hellman sat back, placidly. Barney would never learn that whisky was a poor nerve tonic. The glow wore off too soon, and took the dregs of your nerves with it. The mark-radio squawked, suddenly, and then settled into a regular and growing bip-bip-bip. That would be Jacko, now, by space-sled. He moved a switch to set a guide-pip answering from the air-lock, and felt for his pipe. Within five minutes he saw the air-lock tell-tale wink out, and then on again. The sled's signal began to dwindle as he flipped the intercom again and sat forward.

"All aboard, Barney," he said. "All set?"

"Fire when ready," Logan called, "and none too soon, either. Him and his blasted girl-friends . . ." Hellman took hold of the main drive grips, and the voice-radio crackled, suddenly. Frowning, he reached to cut it off, hesitated.

"McQuaid to R.M.IV . . ." the words were barely distinguishable.

"Go ahead, McQuaid. What?" he snapped.

"Hellman . . . that was Collins just came aboard?"

"Yes. What d'you want?"

"So you're all ready to blow. Good-bye, Hellman. You've had a long run. Too bad it had to end this way . . ." Hellman stiffened, cut off the intercom, put his ear close to the radio. "You gave me a pain in the neck, Hellman. I can still feel it.

Funny, that is. But you'll never do it again. And tell Logan I'll be on hand to comfort Janet, when she realises he's not going to come back. Because none of ye is coming back—*this* time!" The voice was a scream, now, and more and more distorted by the ever-present static. Hellman bent close, felt his astrogator scramble into the control, and squeeze down into his seat. Without looking round, he put up a hand for silence, and listened, grimly. "Good-bye . . . Hellman . . . Logan . . . I'm sorry about Collins. I never had anything against him. . ." the words blurred, ran into each other, became a garble.

"Moving away from us—too damned much ice in between, but what the hell was he getting at?" Hellman raised his head—and it was as if a gigantic hammer slammed the ship, lurching it forward, then back, so that he was jerked in his seat like a doll, and stunned by the insane clangour. Then everything was darkness and ringing silence. Drawing a shaky breath, he groped over his board, found the emergency light-switch. In the feeble glow he looked round and his jaw sagged, foolishly. By his side, helmet thrown back, should have been Jacko Collins. But it wasn't.

"You!" he said, unbelievingly. "What the hell are *you* doing *here*? And where's Jacko?"

"We swapped places," she mumbled, dabbing at her lip, where it had split as her head had rapped the panel in front of her. Against the stark white of her face, the oozing blood was garishly red.

"You swapped places?" he echoed, foolishly, the words sounding impossible in his ears. Then, with a savage effort of will, he booted her problem from his mind, stood up, urgently. "Deal with you later," he snapped. "Stay here. I'm going aft to see about power."

"What happened?" she asked, and he shook his head.

"I hope to find that out, too," he slid into the shaft, feet first and hand-hauled himself rapidly towards the power-deck. No pressure-drop. No automatic section-seals. Nothing.

He slid into the dark of the power-deck, a region of gloom and sleek metal masses, now unnaturally silent. Logan was unconscious, sprawled in mid-air, but breathing. Hellman spent a minute, checking. Only a bash on the head, so far as could be seen. He quested round, studying the plant, not

daring to touch anything until he was sure it was safe. But, again, there was no apparent damage. The main inboard supply-feeder had jumped out, under the impact. He braced himself, stiff-armed it back into circuit. Lights blazed. Fan-motors moaned into life. The atmosphere plant burbled and chuckled. Gravity built up, dragging Logan to the deck. He groaned, struggled to sit up.

" What the hell . . .?" he rubbed his head, gingerly, and peered. " Marsh ! Christ, my head ! What the hell did we run into ?"

" I don't know, yet. We seem to be space-worthy, still. You fit enough to operate ?"

" I reckon I'll live."

" Right. Check everything. I'm going back to control."

In the shaft once more, his bewilderment grew. That, surely, had been an impact and a big one. There had to be damage. But where ? He found Janet still dabbing at her bloody lip, and staring, curiously, at the legion of instruments. He scrambled into his seat and glowered at his board. The answer ought to be here, if anywhere. He checked, carefully, switching to rear-view by habit. But there was no picture. He killed and restored the camera-power, deliberately. Still no picture, aft. He began to see, vaguely, what must have happened—but the reality was something he just did not dare to admit, not all at once. He flipped the intercom.

" Barney ?"

" Nothing wrong here, that I can find, Marsh. Ready to fire ?"

" No. Hold everything just the way it is. I'm going to take a look outside."

" Outside ? !" Logan's voice cracked with sudden suspicion. " What for ?"

" Because I have to find out what's wrong," Hellman said, patiently. " My instruments aren't telling me a damn thing. Physical check is the only way."

He stooped to reach beneath his seat, to unhook a slim hank of cable. To Janet he said, flatly. " You stay here, and listen, just in case I have to ask for something. Mind me—listen !"

He cradled his helmet, slid into the shaft, and hauled himself along, steadily, to duck off where the shaft branched to the lock. Clipping his helmet into place and cycling the lock gave him time to rethink his guesswork. As the outer door swung

back, he lit his headlamp and looked out, leaning, swinging from side, taking in the dreadful reality.

He should have been able to see, on his left, the great uneven wall of ice, faint-lit by the star-field on the right. But there were no stars to left or right. Just bleak walls of grey-green, cold and massive. Ahead, where his light faded into distance, those two crushing walls ran together. Ahead, and below, and above. With rigid calm, he plugged one end of the line to his suit, the other to the intercom-socket by the lock. Then he swung himself out, landing light-footed on the hull. Deliberately, he walked round the ship, until he was diametrically opposite the door. Just to make sure. Then he went back and let himself into the lock again.

" Control !" he said. " Call Barney. I'll meet both of you on the mess-deck."

" What's happened ?" her voice was taut in the helmet-mike.

" Come to the mess-deck and find out," he said, evenly, and broke the contact. Slipping off his helmet, he sighed. As if things weren't already bad enough, it looked as if he might be stuck with an hysterical woman, too.

He made his way along the cramped passage, into the shaft, down and to where it gave on to the space where they ate and slept, as opportunity offered. Three personal lockers doubled as seats, surrounding a bolted-down table. For other furnishing, there was a heater in one corner, a food-pack cupboard in the other, and a double-bunk against the bulkhead. Strictly functional, he thought, peeling out of the upper half of his suit and settling himself on a seat-locker. He had hardly taken hold of his pipe when Logan erupted out of the access-door from the power-deck.

" Who the hell was that on the 'com ?" he demanded. "That wasn't Jacko's voice. What goes on, here ?" Hellman ignored him, concentrated on getting his pipe going. There was a clatter, and a third figure joined them. Logan stared, transfixed, as Janet tried to give him a smile. Hellman, watching, wondered how long she would be able to keep up this effort to be brave.

" You ?" Logan's voice came out a squeak. " What . . . who . . . where's Jacko ? What are *you* doing here ?"

" You don't sound very pleased, Barney. I thought it was such a good idea. I would take Jacko's place to be with you. I seem to have messed it all up."

" You wanted to—but you must have been crazy !" Logan shook his head, dazedly. " This kind of trip is no place for a girl ! You'll have to go back." Janet drooped visibly, and Logan seemed to realise that he wasn't being very gallant. He came forward, put his hand out. " I'm sorry, Janet, honey. It's not that I'm not glad to see you. I am. And I appreciate what you were trying to do. Believe me, I appreciate that."

" I'm sorry . . ." she went into his arms, unhappily. " I thought it was such a good idea. I got so fed up, in Rainbow, with all those other men hanging about, trying to be nice, pestering me all the time. I only wanted to be with you."

" That's all right," Logan soothed, awkwardly. " Don't you worry about it. We'll just take you right back—that'll be all right, won't it, Marsh ?"

" No," Hellman said evenly. " It won't."

" Now hold on !" Logan broke away from Janet. " I know it isn't strictly regular, and it will shoot our schedule all to ribbons . . ." his protest died away as he remembered. " That crash ! We're in trouble ?"

" We are indeed. You'd better sit down, the pair of you." Hellman eyed them, keenly, wondering how they would take it. This was always the trouble with people. You never knew just what they would do, in a new circumstance. That McQuaid, for instance. Who would have credited that he . . .

" Putting it all in one bite," he said, " we are stuck right in the middle of two thousand tons of ice. What happened, so far as I can figure it, was this. McQuaid had this all planned. He waited until we were all complete and ready to push-off. Then he moved his ice-cutter to the far side of the other half of the berg, and gave it a nudge . . . trapping us in between the two halves."

" What the hell for ?" Logan said, stupidly. " What's he gain ?"

" Eliminates the competition, doesn't it ?"

" But that's crazy," Logan came up off his seat, furiously. " Who would do a thing like that ? You want me to believe that McQuaid deliberately wrecked us, all of us, just to get rid of me, so that he could make time with Janet ? I'm not going to believe a thing like that !"

" Two thousand tons of ice, out there, says different," Hellman said. " You care to work out some other explanation for how that split berg just happened to come together again,

I'll be interested to hear it. In the meanwhile, we're in the middle of it."

" Why weren't we crushed ?" Janet demanded.

" A combination of circumstances. Take a big berg like this, and you often find a warm pocket about the centre. Pressure, accumulated heat from radiation, other effects, and you have a soft core. When you slice through, with the hot beam, that soft core explodes away into vapour. Sometimes, In this case, we have our nose buried in one half, and just room in the other half to accept our tail. A bit of luck, for us."

" Hold on !" Logan's voice was shaking, now. " I'm just getting this. You mean, we're stuck—in the *middle* of a berg? That we can't blast, or cut loose, or anything? We're trapped?"

" So far as I can see, that's it. When I was outside, just now, I could see that our stern end was ice-bound. I wouldn't fancy trying to fire the main-jets with the venturis stopped up and the atti-jets aren't going to help us a lot. If they're still there. The stern-view modules don't register, in any case. We're stuck, all right."

Hellman sucked gently at his pipe, watching Logan from under his lowered brows. In his mind, at that moment, the future was blank. He'd cast a tentative estimate into it and found nothing. He would try again, later. He would go on trying as long as it was possible. But, right at this moment, the important thing was—how were these two going to react ?

" There must be *something* we can do," Janet said, firmly. " We can't just sit here and let it happen. There must be something !" Hellman kept his eyes on Logan. The big power-engineer was staring into nowhere, his face slack, only his lips moving, soundlessly.

" McQuaid !" he burst out. " That damned murdering Irish bastard. He'll be out there, somewhere, gloating. If I could only get my hands on him . . ." he strangled the air, passionately. Then, impulsively, ". . . the radio ! Can't we get help ?" Hellman shook his head.

" You know better than that, Barney. Maximum sending range is only a hundred miles or so, in ' free.' Inside this lot, nothing."

" Damn it all to hell !" Logan screamed, suddenly. " Don't just *sit* there ! We've got to do something. We've got to get out !"

" We might be able to get out, at that. We have the gear to chop a fair sized hole, enough to pass a man in a suit, provided it isn't too far. And the chances are the two halves of the ice-face don't match, in several places. With luck, we can get out —as far as the outside of the berg. But then . . .?"

" Then, we take a jet-pack each and head for Rainbow . . ."

" Stop and think a bit," Hellman advised. " We *were* thirty-five miles or so away from Rainbow, when Janet came aboard. Since McQuaid bounced us, Lord knows where we are—or where we'll be by the time we do dig our way out. These suits have a six-hour supply maximum, as you know, and it may well take us that long to get free. And then what ?"

" Damn you !" Logan said. " You cold-blooded fish. Sitting there with your blasted pipe and that flaming know-all look on your face. You're enjoying this. You aren't even going to try. You're just going to sit there and let it happen, so you can watch us."

" Barney !" Janet was outraged. " What good will that do?"

" What the hell d'you know about it ?" He turned on her, savagely. " You've got no business here, anyway. Why the blazes couldn't you stay put, where you belonged ?"

" Are you trying to suggest that this is my fault ?"

" Well, no, of course not," he shrank away from the fire in her eyes. " I didn't mean that, at all. I'm sorry . . ." he groped for words that wouldn't come, and swung again on Hellman. " Come on, Marsh," he pleaded. " There must be something we can do. There's got to be. I'm sorry I blew off, just now. It's the thought of that damned McQuaid. He must be raving mad, to pull a trick like this. But we can beat him, can't we ?"

" We can try," Hellman said, evenly, " but we had better get it clear, here and now, that we're on our own. We can't hope for any help from outside. As you say, McQuaid is probably insane, but he has been very clever, all the same. Nobody will suspect him at all. By the time they find out about Jacko, it will be too late to do anything, even if they wanted to. At the most, they may beam a message home to Mars, carrying a reprimand for us. Then, if and when we fail to arrive, we'll just be written off as lost, the way the others were. But nobody will so much as look twice at McQuaid."

" Damn it, don't *talk* like that ! Don't just talk !" Logan put out his hands again, threateningly. " What are we going to do ?"

" Barney !" Janet shouted at him. " There's no sense in screaming and shouting like that. We've got to keep calm, and work things out."

" Calm ? Keep calm ? You're another one like him. Keep calm. Don't get excited. Don't you realise we're as good as dead, if we don't do something ?"

" I think we all realise that," Hellman said. " And there's plenty we can be doing, right now."

" Such as what ?" Logan's attitude changed, in a flash. " Anything you say. Just name it, that's all."

" Two things strike me as important, to start with. Janet, go get the data-sheet, bring it back here. We need to know just where we are, roughly, and what sort of course they had us lined up for. That way, we'll know how long we have. Later on, if we can dig out, I'll want you to take sights, figure out what orbit we're in. That's routine, only you'll have to do it by hand, from the berg surface. Barney, you and me will take another check of the power-deck angle. I'd like to know just how we stand as far as the main tubes are concerned. Meet us there, Janet. All right ?"

Chapter Three

He watched Logan into the shaft, followed him carefully. This step-by-step check was purely data gathering. Whether it would offer any solutions or not, he didn't know. At this moment, he couldn't see any. But it would help, if only to provide the other two with something to do. Logan, particularly. Hellman had known, for several trips now, that Logan was prone to nerves, but had thought it nothing more than the natural reaction to what was, after all, a highly risky undertaking. Now, in a real pinch, it was beginning to look as if the big engineer was hollow inside.

" Main drive lines all isolated," Logan reported, making hasty switches. " You want to go down the tube, or shall I ?"

" We'll take one each," Hellman suggested. " Janet can take the third, when she comes. It might help if she actually sees what's what from the inside."

Short seconds later, with the access-plates undogged, he saw Logan slide, feet first, into one of the main drive vents. Then he did likewise, easing himself into the dark, craning his neck

to peer past his feet. The inside of the tube was black as night, and slick with soot. He estimated about eight feet of travel before his light picked up a glint, and he came to rest on powdered ice. Kicking vigorously, he managed to disturb the stuff enough to be reasonably sure that the flare-end of the tube was undamaged. That was something, at any rate. He kicked off, wriggling, and slid slowly back along the tube until he could get his head and shoulders clear of the access, to see Janet staring.

" You, too," he said, scrambling clear. " Barney's down that one. You go in here, look. Just slide along. You're looking to see whether the discharge end is buckled or damaged in any way. In you go. Box up first. It's dirty in there." He watched her slide from sight, and turned to give Logan a hand to scramble free.

" All AOK down there," the engineer reported, " but choked with ice. Couple of feet of it, maybe. For what good it does us."

" Useful to know that we can blast, if we ever get the chance. We'll have to check the atti's from outside."

" If we can chop our stern free . . .?"

" It wouldn't help much. We might do a bit of melting, with the blast, but we'd never melt a hole big enough to take the ship out. And we can't back up on a blast, anyway !"

" Damn that McQuaid !" Logan slammed his fist against the secondary compressor head. " I'd like to get my hands on him, right now."

" He has his bad time coming, when he finds out about Janet."

" I guess that's right. That will just about finish him, but it won't do us any good . . ." Logan's voice slipped out of control, for a moment. Then with a furtive glance at the open tube where Janet was still investigating, he said, " Honest, Marsh, do we have any sort of chance at all ?"

" Frankly, if we have, I can't see it. We're alive, and unhurt. The ship is in ' go ' condition. We have fuel, stores, and food. That's on our side. But we are well and truly stuck, smack in the middle of two thousand tons of runaway iceberg . . . and, so far as I can see, there isn't a damn thing we can do about it." Logan seemed to wilt. For one awful moment, Hellman thought he was going to cry. Then Janet's helmet appeared, and he moved to give her a hand out of the tube.

"It's a funny feeling," she said, " to think that, inside there, will be a mass of streaming fire, when we're going along. I was thinking, couldn't we sort of blast gently ? I mean, just enough to melt the ice ?"

" Wouldn't work," Logan growled. " The fuel won't burn unless it's atomised and at critical temperature. And it's got to be travelling at a minimum flow-rate in order to get the turbulence, the right mixture—oh, what the hell—it would take too long to explain !"

" I was only suggesting," she said, mutinously. " We've got to think of something and there's no sense in snarling at me for trying. Getting mad isn't going to help, is it ?"

" Airing your ignorance won't help, either," he snapped. " Jacko wouldn't have said a damn silly thing like that. What the hell made you think you could swap places with him ?"

" *He* didn't seem to think there was anything stupid about it."

" I think Janet has a point there," Hellman intervened, smoothly. " Jacko was as much to blame as anybody. But we aren't going to do any good by laying blame on things. What we need is the fullest possible information on how we stand. Janet, by the data, how long do we have ?"

" We are scheduled, here, for a twenty-two day trip. That is, if we are to match Mars orbit. There's a whole stack of other figures, of course, but they aren't going to mean much, unless we can do something about controlling our path. I don't see what use this data is, anyway."

" It may be useless, at that. What I'm hoping, if we can chop our way out to some point where we can make observations, will you be able to plot our position and attitude ?"

" That'll be simple enough. You have a visi-fix ?"

" Yes. In control. Jacko's locker. All right, that's our next bet then. Barney, take her along with you, and show her how to fix up with scramble-gear. I'll dog-up these doors, and then look out the com-lines. See you at the airlock when you're ready."

Ten minutes later the three of them huddled in the close-walled entry to the lock, while Hellman checked just to make sure that Janet knew what to do.

" The G-force will decrease sharply as we go away from the ship," he warned her, " so be careful with your effort. And if you do slip and fall, say so at once. I shall be ahead of you, Barney at the rear. Between us, we can hold you, but only if

we have warning. And remember, even if you don't feel very heavy, you still have mass. Now, I'll go first. We link up on com as soon as we're all out."

" Is there any chance of losing our way ?" she wondered.

" Easiest thing in the world to do. That's why we have the marker-pipe. A non-modulated signal carries fairly well. So long as Barney can hear that, we can find our way back. You have the fix and the data-pad ? Right, here we go."

It was dark outside. For all that he had scrambled out of an airlock in space many dozens of times before, Hellman felt strange, this time. He liked to be able to look at the stars, to watch them wheeling past. He had spent many a meditative hour, sitting quietly on the surface of a careening iceberg, just watching those millions of distant suns. Now, ridiculously, he felt more shut in than he had done inside the ship itself. The garish beam from his headlamp struck odd glitters, here and there, and it was as if a wall towered away up in front of him, whichever way he turned. As soon as they were linked he could hear Janet's excited breathing.

" Like being in a cave," she murmured. " It's huge !"

" Stay here a moment," he ordered. " I want to take a look at the stern."

It didn't take long for him to see that there wasn't much hope there. By sheer chance, the whole of the tail assembly had rammed itself into the other half of the pocket he had picked out for the nose. It would have taken long and arduous hours of labour to cut that lot free, and to no purpose. He went back.

" It's my guess," he told them, " that the atti-jets and most of the view-modules are just so much scrap now. We'd better start climbing."

He made an assault on the ice-wall just forward of the air-lock, and began clawing his way up and out. As he had known, the gravity pull diminished perceptibly with every yard he moved. It made the going easier, in one way, but harder in another. Soon he was at the stage where he had to secure a grip with his feet and one hand before he could swing the ice-pick with the other. He estimated he had gone about twenty-five yards or so when his head-light caught a double glimmer. The other ice-face was closing in. He reported to the others, and paused, casting about for a likely spot. A convenient crack, now, would save an enormous amount of labour.

" I'm bearing right," he announced. " There's a fair-sized flaw. Should take us forward quite a way."

" Marsh !" Janet sounded puzzled. " If the two halves of the original lump have just been pushed together, why didn't they bounce apart again ? And if they are just resting together, couldn't we push them apart, somehow, and get out like that ?"

" Nice try," he said, cheerfully, " but I'm afraid not. We'll never know just what sort of thrust McQuaid gave it, but those ice-cutters can turn on a devil of a lot of power for short bursts. Have to, to manoeuvre the icebergs the way they do. Now, a thousand tons is a lot of mass to crash to a stop. Heat of impact will have melted quite a lot of the contact faces, and they would freeze again, almost at once. So far as we're concerned, it might as well be a solid mass. This flaw-gap is a bit of good fortune we can't count on too long. Ice, even at this temperature, acts like a very viscous fluid under heavy pressures. The holes, near the centre anyway, will gradually fill up."

" I never thought about heat of impact," she confessed. " You make me feel ignorant. I'm not much help, am I ?"

" Ignorance is the rule on this job," he told her. " There are no experts on the rain-run. No two orbits are ever the same. No two bergs, either. Every trip is a new experience, and a gamble. That's why we can't get insurance."

" I didn't know that. Barney, you never said you couldn't get insured."

" What good would insurance be to me," Logan growled, " if I'm not there to collect it ?"

' You made a slip there, Barney,' Hellman said, but to himself. ' Janet is not going to like that attitude at all.' As he scrambled on into the glitter-darkness of the ice-tunnel he reflected, idly, that there were a lot of things Janet wasn't going to like. She was seeing an aspect of Barney Logan that she could never have seen before, and not a very impressive one, either. On her present showing, she had plenty of guts, and she was bound to notice the absence of them in her beloved. Hellman wondered, vainly, whatever had made a girl like her fall for a man like that. Then, all at once, he caught sight of a different kind of glitter, and switched off his headlamp to peer ahead.

" We're in luck," he reported back. " I can see the stars. We aren't going to have to dig, after all."

Ten more yards of scramble brought him out into a cleft between two grey-green peaks, and the haze of ice-dust swirled round his feet as he braced himself to haul in the line. From a snap glance at the diamond-bright stars, he guessed they were not spinning at all rapidly, and that would be a help, too. He had no idea just how good Janet was, but even a fully experienced navigator had his work cut out taking a fix from a toppling base.

" This is where you take over," he said, as she came up into the starlight. " You should be able to get a better ' point ' from one of these peaks. Soon as Barney is clear, we'll give you a hand up."

" I feel as if I could jump that high, easily."

" You probably could, but you'd better not try it. You might easily go into a little orbit of your own."

" I don't really understand about the ice," she admitted, as Logan's head showed and they handed him on to solid footing. " I mean, either it should melt, in the heat of the sun—I know it's a long way off, but all the same, it's warm. I can feel it, now, on my face. Or it should evaporate or something, in zero pressure. Shouldn't it ?"

" Take your first fix," Hellman advised, " while you can see the sun. Maybe I can explain, while we're waiting for the second one."

She peered at him through her faceplate, and he could just make out that she was frowning.

" You seem to know a lot about it. I believe you could do this just as well as I could."

" I can take a rough fix, certainly. We can all do the other man's job, up to a point, in a pinch. How d'you fancy we get any sleep on a three-week trip otherwise ? Hasn't Barney or Jacko told you anything ?"

" Look, let her get on with it," Logan interrupted roughly. " All this chat is just a waste of time. We ought to be able to see Vesta from here, if that's the sun. Get cracking, Janet, honey. These suit charges don't last for ever, and we have to get all the way back, yet."

" I can manage by myself, thank you," she said, icily, and went pick-and-heave up the steep slope nearest to hand. Hellman saw her settle herself and get busy with the portable visi-fix. He picked out a handy hump and sat. The sun was warm, just here, for all its remoteness. Two hundred and

seventy million miles away, it looked like a glowing red spot with wavering fringes. He shifted his head, trying to pick out familiar patterns. The rugged surface of the berg fell away so rapidly in curvature that it was like sitting on a mountain-top, and the star-field in view was immense. He could make out Vesta, now. Logan saw it, at the same moment.

" Christ !" he breathed. " It's miles ! That must have been a hell of a shove we had from McQuaid . . ."

" Mark," Janet said, suddenly. " I'm taking a reading on five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . now !"

" Check !" Hellman noted the time. " When do you want the next ?"

" Mark me in fifteen minutes, please."

" Right. Now, about this ice. In the first place, it does evaporate, but very slowly, as ice-dust. And then that settles, because there is a very small gravity field, still. And you get a layer of dust, which is both an efficient insulation and a reflector, so the heat of the sun has no chance to warm it at all. Have you ever been to the Northern Sector, back home on Mars ?"

" Yes, once or twice."

" Then you've seen the ice-cap there, even in bright sunlight. It doesn't melt, simply because it is a reflector . . ."

" What's the use of all this lecture stuff ?" Logan muttered. " She isn't going to have any use for it. We ought to be figuring out some way of breaking that ship loose." He had seated himself on a hump close by, and was keeping an eye on the hole by which they had come out.

" It's all information," Hellman said, mildly. " We're going to need every bit of information we can find, if we are to have any chance at all. Stand by for your mark, Janet."

" All right," she raised the visi-fix, aiming it. " Start counting when ready." Studying his chronometer, he counted her down the last few seconds. Then when she had her figures, she came sliding near-weightlessly down the slope.

" We'll go back," he decided. " Mustn't run our suits too near the maximum. It's best, always, to have a bit of tolerance." He urged Logan to go down first. " Just drop, Barney. We'll pay out until you get your feet set. Then you go next, Janet . . ."

" Look !" she pointed, and he half-turned. " Those black patches !"

" Oh ! That's where Barney and me were sitting down. Soot from our suits. See, you've left black streaks too, where you slid. We'll have to clean up a bit, when we get inboard. Now, if you're ready, Barney ?"

" Let her go !"

" All right, Janet. Just drop, and fend off with your hands. This first part should be easy."

It was, and they made good time until the ship's G-unit began to make its influence felt. Then the climb down became arduous, and they were all glad to reach the air-lock once more. As soon as they were inside, Hellman became brisk.

" Out of those suits. I'll wipe 'em over and fit a recharge. Barney, you see about some food. Janet, you take your figures along to control and get them developed."

" She doesn't need any development, not figure-wise," Logan muttered, as Janet went away. In the standard white-cotton coverall one-piece specially designed to be worn in a suit, she made an attractive picture.

" Very nice," Hellman admitted, " but this is hardly the time . . ."

" Oh, don't give me that ' first things first ' business, not again !" Logan snarled. " Don't you have any blood, at all ? Don't you ever think of anything except the job in hand ?"

" No. I don't. And you're still alive as a consequence. We may have to count on her mathematics, on your technical expertise, on anything we can dig up. We're going to need everything we've got, and a lot of luck to back it. And romantic interludes aren't going to help."

" You've thought of something ?" the engineer's instant hopefulness was almost pathetic.

" Not a thing. Why should it be me ? You've got wits. Use them—if you can keep your attention away from her legs, that is !"

" Who the hell are you to tell me what I ought to do ?" Logan flared up again. " You cold-blooded fish. You don't care, one way or the other. Life doesn't mean a damn thing to you. You haven't got anything to live for. I have ! Janet and me—we were all set to take an option in that new settlement, me in charge of the power-plant—a home and kids—but that wouldn't mean anything to you, would it ?" All at once, Hellman put out his hands, took Logan by the neck and pinned him against the bulkhead.

" Listen," he said, coldly. " My skin means as much to me as yours does to you. I may need you, just as you may need me —or both of us may need Janet. But get this, just this once, because I shan't repeat it—if it will help in any way to dispense with you, then I'll do it and not think twice. If you're not able to pull your weight, then you're just waste mass eating food and breathing air, a passenger !"

" Let go !" Logan choked, tearing at the steely fingers that were holding him fast. "You're mad, damn you, You're mad !" His voice died away into a gurgle and his face was purpling. Calming himself with a tremendous effort, Hellman slacked his grip, dropped his hands, and stood back. For a moment, he was aghast at himself.

" I'm sorry . . ." he breathed. " I could have killed you, there." He looked at his hands, wonderingly, then at Logan, who was croaking for breath and massaging his throat. " Now you know," he said, still breathless. " You push me too far, Barney—just once more—and you know what will happen. Now, get on with that grub." He swung away, gathering up the discarded suits. As he sat, wiping them free of the greasy soot and inserting new power-charges, he mused on the mystery within himself that he had just found. He had never dreamed that the barrier was so thin between calm control and murderous rage.

Chapter Four

The explosive urge was completely gone, now, and he could analyse it with placidity. Perhaps it wouldn't come again for a long time. But it was there. It was a new factor to be reckoned with, another problem burden. He combed over the incident, meticulously, seeking the trigger. Janet ? He thought of her, deliberately, and shook his head. Hardly. He had been exposed to attractive women many times. What rain-run spaceman hadn't ? Back on Mars they were of the elite, their walk-out uniform a passport to respect and honour.

What, then ? He probed, but could find no satisfactory answer. Hanging the suits by the air-lock, he made his way to the mess-room, saw that Logan was appropriately busy laying out the heated plasti-bulbs of soup-paste and fruit-pulp. As Janet appeared, he thought of a small factor.

" Make a start," he said. " I'll just pull off some of this G-field. No point in struggling when we don't have to." He slid along to the power-deck, set the pseudo-grav at ' 4,' and went back.

" Four feet per second," he explained, for Janet's benefit. " That's one-eighth Earth-normal. Enough to keep things from floating around. Saves energy, too, and we may need all we can save. How did the plot work out ?"

" We're toppling about one rev every three and a half hours," she spread out an onion-skin sheet marked with heavy lines, " and we're due to intersect Mars-orbit in twenty-two days, roughly, at this speed. I can fine-up the figures, if you want, but it won't make a lot of difference. We will miss Mars by about two orbit-days."

" Not good," Hellman said, " but better than I had expected, at that."

" Better—than what ?"

" At least McQuaid pushed us the right way. The other way, and we would be now looping out way out towards Jupiter. At least we are going in the right direction, only hardly fast enough."

" If we miss Mars by two days, what odds does it make which way we're going ?" Logan growled. " We can't do anything about it."

" I wasn't thinking of that. Did you extend the curve, Janet ? As far as Earth, say ?" She stared at him, puzzled.

" Earth ? We'll be half-a-year from that ! Besides, that would put another ten or eleven days on to the trip. What were you thinking of, Marsh ?"

" Just exploring the possibilities. What you were asking, about why the ice doesn't melt, for instance. The closer we get to the sun, the faster it *will* melt, and the more chance of it breaking up. If we'd been in line for a close pass at Earth, we might have been able to count on it breaking up under Roche forces. Or we might run into one of the inner group asteroids."

" I checked out all those," Janet told him. " Hermes is the only one that is anyway close enough to count, and we'll pass it by about three million miles."

" So much for that," Hellman sighed. " We can't count on that kind of luck, anyway. And we haven't enough food and air to last us much more than thirty days . . ." a silence fell

around the table, as they sucked at their food-bulbs and pondered.

" You *sure* we can't chop our stern free ?" Logan muttered.

" It wouldn't do any good. Look, our tail is buried about twelve feet in ice. Even if we could hack that lot free, we would still want to back up to get the nose clear. That's another fifteen feet. Janet can work it out for you just how much ice that is. A hole at least twenty-seven feet deep and at least fourteen feet in diameter."

" That's more than a thousand cubic feet."

" And there you are," Hellman shrugged. " We may have to try it, eventually, but it's going to be a hell of a job, with what equipment we have. I suggest the best thing we can do, right now, is get some sleep. We need another fix, in about eight hours, before we can accept those plot-figures of yours, Janet. You know that, don't you ?"

" Oh yes. I said my results were only rough. But I don't think they'll be very much out, you know." She paused in thought. Then, " I'm surprised you don't have apparatus for digging. You seem to be equipped for just about everything else. Why not for digging holes ?"

" In the normal course of events," Hellman got up from the table, " we shunt the berg about by ramming. Jacko would take a fix, just as you have done, and work out the appropriate spot to apply thrust. With that data, I back off, circle round, and ram the nose home. Then push. I think you two had better use the bunks. I can nap in my chair, in control. All right ? I can set an alarm for six hours from now."

" Only two bunks ?" she saw them with new eyes. " Why not three ?"

" Because there's always one of us awake usually. But there's no need for a lookout, this time."

" I don't want to rob you of a bunk," she protested. " I'm the interloper here. You take it, and I'll go forward . . ."

All at once, Hellman felt that blinding rage begin to swell, and he turned away, hurriedly, to plunge into the shaft and make his way to the control-cabin. He was still shaking as he wriggled into his foam-padded seat, so much that he could hardly manage to light his pipe. Clenching his teeth on the well-worn stem, he got a grip on himself.

What had kicked it off this time ? He thought back, carefully, trying to see himself as a complete stranger, seeking

that hidden 'button.' Was it Janet, after all? He took himself to pieces, mercilessly. This was something he had to know. Too much was at stake, here, to chance total loss on the quirk of some uncontrolled psychosis. Their one stake in the hole was intelligence, the human factor. And that was it! So obvious that he had passed it by half a dozen times, he saw it now with clarity. The one thing that was new, was quite different about this trip, was the fact that everything stood, or fell, by the unpredictable human factor.

Once he had the key, the whole pattern made sense. McQuaid, insane and unbalanced with rivalry. Janet, tempted into incredible folly because of her emotional involvement with Barney. Barney losing his grip on what little nerve he had because of the presence of Janet. And he, Hellman, fighting to restrain this unsuspected homicidal fury—why? Because, for once, he was being forced to depend on the uncertain human element. Hellman, the cool, the calm, the unworried, when he was dealing with figures, with a ship, with blast and thrust, with icebergs and orbits. But now he had to reckon with people, and people, notoriously, had minds of their own. They argued.

He tucked his pipe away, grimly. Now that he knew the pattern, at least he would be alert to it. He settled himself to doze, but not very comfortably, either in mind or body.

The sleep had not been very fertile in the field of suggestions. Logan offered the possibility of running power-lines from the ship's fusion unit, with make-shift heaters, to melt the ice clear, but it was just a trial balloon, and none of them was very much moved when Janet produced quick calculations to show that it would take months to effect any discernible change. Then she had an idea of her own.

"Don't laugh," she warned. "I really don't know much about it, but I was thinking of the pseudo-gravity unit. I mean couldn't it be reversed? Sort of explode this iceberg, from the inside?"

"You're ingenious, if nothing else," Hellman grinned. "Pity it wouldn't work. Even if we could reverse the gravity field, the first thing to fly apart would be the ship itself. In any case, the G-field won't go into reverse. It's too technical to explain in a word or two, but, well, how do you go slower than 'stop'?"

" You mean, like absolute zero, and the speed of light ?"

" That's it, exactly. These things are theoretically possible. So is null-G. But in practice the nearer you get to them, the harder it is to get that little bit more. Negative-G is just as unreal as colder-than-zero. Any more ideas ?"

" Not one," she confessed. " I feel so useless. And grubby, too."

" Well, *that's* no problem, not with us," he told her. " Water is the one thing we have enough of, and to spare. Just as soon as we've taken this check fix, Barney will show you how to operate the shower, and you can bath as lavishly as you like."

" You want me along ?" Logan asked, moodily. " You two can make that trip out to see the stars without me, can't you ?" Hellman stiffened, and almost at once, relaxed again. This was the thing to watch for.

" Just as you like," he said, easily, hoping his momentary hesitation hadn't shown. " I expect you've plenty of routine chores to do. All right, Janet ?"

" What are you going to be doing, Barney ?" she demanded, and Hellman held his breath as Logan's face hardened.

" Shower, he said, didn't he ? Well, it will want checking over. Also the hot water system. And I have my power-deck checks to run. Satisfied ?"

She reddened at the roughness of his tone, but bit her lip and let it rest. Ten minutes later she was following Hellman up the jagged face of the ice. He could hear her breathing.

" Barney always has been a bit nervy," he offered. " This kind of job is bad on the nerves. You shouldn't blame him for cracking up a bit."

" Why should you make excuses for *him* ?" she retorted. " You've been on the job a lot longer than he has, and you're not snapping everybody's head off."

" I can do my share of snapping, if the provocation is right," he admitted, remembering his fingers around Barney's throat.

" I'll believe that when I see it," she said. " Jacko has told me a lot about you. ' Old Hell-binder ' he calls you. Always knows exactly what to do, and at exactly the right time. Never gets excited. Absolutely dependable . . ."

" I hope I can live up to it," Hellman felt uncomfortable.

" But I'd always thought of you as old," she went on. " The few times I've seen you, you've always been by yourself, so quiet and reserved. And you're not old, at all, are you ?"

" Depends what you mean. I'm thirty."

" Barney is twenty-eight. Jacko is twenty-seven. So am I. Don't you ever get excited at anything ?"

" Sometimes. Perhaps not in the way you mean, but there are things which excite me. I'll show you, later on. Right now you'd better mind your step. We're coming to the tunnel."

The sun was hidden round the other face of the iceberg, as she went up the mound to take her fix. Slowly, looking at the wheeling stars, he followed her up, settled himself on a spur just by her feet. She took her mark, and spent a few seconds, scribbling.

" Marsh, are you any good at listening to other people's problems ?"

" I've done quite a bit of listening. Can't say I'm any good at the answers, though. People baffle me, most of the time."

" It's about Barney. I'm just realising I don't know him very well. I'd always thought him big and handsome, tough, dependable, exciting."

" And now ?"

" Well, he's a coward, isn't he ?" She caught her breath. " Just because he's afraid—that's why he's snapping and barking all the time."

" Isn't that a bit hard on him ? Suppose you're right, and he is what you call a coward ? What do you believe—that a man is the way he is, by choice, or because it just happened that way ?"

" That's a funny question to ask, isn't it ? What difference does it make ? I suppose—no, I'm sure—that a person is able to choose the way they are. The way he is, I mean."

" Then you think Barney deliberately chose to be a coward?"

" Marsh !" Janet sounded angry. " You caught me. That's a trick question."

" Of course it is. Either he chose to be the way he is, which is unthinkable. Or he couldn't help being what he is, in which case it isn't fair to blame him. Or judge him."

" But it doesn't alter the way he is, does it ?"

" No, I suppose not . . ."

" Well don't sound so impatient, Marsh."

" I'm sorry. It's just that we have enough troubles, right now, without having to carry the extra burden of a couple of out-of-joint lovers. Ready for your mark ? Stand by . . ." He counted her down ten seconds, and she took her second fix.

" It's important, to me," she argued, when she had done scribbling. " After all, it's my whole future."

" I don't agree," he said, giving her his arm as they began slithering back to the outlet hole. " Your whole future, and mine, is right here. You can fall in and out of love a dozen times, with a dozen men, and still survive. But unless we three pull something very unexpected out of the bag, right here and now, none of us is going to have any future at all."

" I suppose that's one way of looking at it."

" It's the only way, for me. You repeated some gossip, just now, about my reputation. Whether it was deserved or not, I got it by sticking to one rule, which is to deal with life as it comes, the way it is—and never mind the way we would like it to be, or the way it ought to be—just a minute !" He caught her arm as they were on the brink of the hole.

" What ?"

" Look there !" he pointed, to where two black smudges marred the clean grey-white surface.

" What of it ?" she asked. " That's where you and Barney sat, last time, remember ? The soot from your suits . . .?"

" Yes, but I sat on a hump. It was at least three feet prominent. *That* is a hole." He went over, put his boot into the shallow depression. Then the other one. Then he went back to Janet.

" I want you to get some more figures, if you can. Enough so that you can calculate the surface area of this whole berg, roughly. Also so that you can map out which areas get the sunlight as we topple. Can you do that ?"

" I think so. Should be easy enough. But why ? Are you on to something, Marsh ? Are you ?"

" I may be. It's so damned obvious that I'd rather not say, just yet. Not until I have those figures of yours and time to think."

When she had slid down from the mound again he was still staring at those two dirty patches, as if fascinated by them.

" How long would you say those two areas have been exposed to sunlight, since we left ?" he asked, and she frowned, mumbled to herself.

" Hour and a half, roughly."

" And that was enough to melt down a hump of ice three feet high by less than a foot square !"

" Oh !" she breathed. " I see it. The black—it absorbs heat rays . . . "

" That's it. That's enough. The rest is sheer mechanics and a matter of whether we can do it or not. Come on !"

She was about ten feet in front of him, and well clear of the tunnel when he heard her puzzled exclamation, and then, " The air is full of sparks . . ."

" Hold on. I'll be there in a moment." He scrambled down to where she hung, and directed the beam of his headlamp around. Not sparks, exactly, but a myriad needle-points of glitter. Ice-dust ! The space was full of it.

" Maybe the ship has shifted, or a small 'quake has stirred it up. We'll have to be careful. Keep your ear on the door-marker."

He groped his way ahead of her, feeling for hand and foot holds. The swirling dust grew thicker as they came closer to the ship, and Hellman knotted his brow trying to account for it. A cloud stirred by a shift or slip should have dispersed long ago. This was getting thicker. It was being made. What the devil was Barney up to ? The marker-pip grew so loud in his ear that he knew they must be well-nigh on top of the ship, but his beam was useless, in the dense haze. Pure sensation, under his feet, told him he was standing on the hull. He groped forward, found the air lock by feel, made Janet stand there and wait. Then he went further aft, step by step, until he found what he has half-expected. And he went back.

" Barney must have gone mad," he said, once they were inside and he could open his face-plate. " You know what this is ?" he brushed with his gloved hand at the dust which was rapidly condensing into drops of water on his suit.

" He's pumping water out of the waste-vent ! God knows what he hopes to achieve by that, the bloody fool."

He slung his suit to one side and hastened off into the shaft. As he had expected, he found the shower-unit running and thick with steam. With quick, angry motions, he shut it down and went in search of Logan. As he slid, feet-first, into the power-deck, his nose told him what to espect, although he could hardly believe it. Janet, too, sniffed curiously as she came wriggling out of the shaft.

" What's that smell ?" she asked. " And what's wrong with him ?"

" He is what is sometimes known as ' crocked.' Drunk as a coot. The smell is what happens when you carefully distill alcohol out of rocket fuel. Frankly, I didn't think Barney knew that much chemistry—and I'd say we have a case of possible lead-poisoning on our hands, at the very least. The bloody fool !"

" Anything we can do for him ?"

" Nothing at all, except put him to bed. We'll do that, first. Let me pull the gravity off a bit, make it easier. Then I'll have to check round his plant, just in case he's left something unhooked."

" Was he discharging water ?"

" Oh yes. Hot water from your shower. I hope he was already drunk when he thought of that. I'd hate to think he could dream it up cold sober. If we had been a bit later getting back, we would have had to cut our way in."

" Suppose he is poisoned ?"

" That's his headache. We won't know until he recovers enough to show some symptoms. In the meantime, you go have your shower."

" Never mind that," she objected. " What about the calculations you wanted done. What had you in mind ?"

" Come back to the power-deck and I'll show you."

He led her back to the space where shining metal stood poised and ready to churn out savage blasts of thrust. The stink of alcohol fumes was almost gone, and a quick check round served to reassure him that nothing was dangerously wrong.

"Fuel injectors, mixers, igniters . . ." he gestured, ". . . oxidant comes in here, and so-on. Now, you were in a firing tube. As you said, there's a hell of a flame in there, when we are blasting. For short bursts, we just let the whole thing get hot. It's lined with ceramic refractories, anyway. But, in this job, there are times when we have to maintain thrust for as long as half an hour, sometime more. And that would just burn out the whole assembly if it wasn't for this," he patted a stubby cylinder.

" Pressure injection fuel additive. It is nothing more than carbon-black in an oil suspension. The particles are all within one to three microns in size, and they form a relatively cool envelope around the flame. Hence the soot. Now, if we can hump some of this out to the surface and spray it around—but I need you to work out covering area dispersal, stuff like that. You understand. I'll give you all the figures I can find. We have data on this in the ship's log."

" I can try," she said, thoughtfully. " But how are you going to do the spraying ? Have you anything like that ?"

" That," he said, grimly, " was going to be for Barney to work out. I shall just have to potter about, on my own, while we wait for him to come out of the staggers."

Chapter Five

It was all of five hours later, and he was still scowling at various odd parts and fittings, trying to imagine them into an assembly of some kind, when Janet came sliding into the chamber.

" He's stirring a bit, Marsh. I've been working on the table in the mess-room, just to keep an eye on him."

" All right. I'll come up. How are the figures coming along ?"

" I've done them as well as I can. This berg must be an irregular mass. Taking a basis of two thousand tons, and calling it roughly spherical, it ought to be no more than sixty feet through, but it's a lot more than that. It must be discoidal. Oblate, anyway. Not that it makes all that much difference. The surface area is about eleven thousand square feet. Assuming the covering power of the carbon-black suspension is what the data-sheet gives, and is not just manufacturer's optimism, twenty gallons should do it."

" Assume we don't get optimum spread and we have to go over it twice—call it fifty gallons. And that is just about all we carry."

Logan was moaning, wretchedly, as they reached him. Under the sweat, his face was greenish.

" I feel sick," he said, faintly.

" I'll bet you do," Hellman agreed, unsympathetically. " And I've got stuff in the first-aid kit that will make you even sicker. If you want it." Logan managed to signify his willingness to try anything, and Hellman got the kit. Half-an-hour later, and somewhat emptier, Logan dragged himself to a seat, and decided he was going to live after all.

" I don't remember a lot about it," he confessed. "It was the steam that gave me the idea. If you bubble steam through first-stage fuel, the alcohol comes off first. Chap I know told me that one. It seemed like a good idea, at the time. And I was fixing the shower up, anyway."

" Then you were already canned when you decided to discharge hot water out the vent ?"

" God ! Did I do that ?"

" You very nearly iced us out. Still—that's in the past. Crying over it won't help. Janet, hot up some coffee-bulbs. I could do with some, and I'll bet you can. Barney, listen. I think we may have a way of worming out of this trap we're in,

but we need your help . . .” he went on to explain how finely-divided carbon-black would accelerate the absorption of heat and the dissolution of their ice-prison.

“ But you can't !” Logan protested, weakly. “ Hell, if you squirt away all the additive, we'll burn out the tubes when we blast !”

“ That's a chance we'll have to gamble with. We may be able to put down without burning out. We can damn well try, anyway. Point is, how can we get a workable spray for the stuff ?”

“ Nothing easier,” the unhappy engineer stared in surprise. “ You kidding, Marsh ?” He reached for the hot coffee, squeezed and sucked eagerly. Then he shook his head, wonderingly. “ How the hell did you miss it ? Look, those injector units are self-contained. They come off. They're interchangeable, what I mean. They have to be, so you can replace them when they're blown out.”

“ You mean . . .” Hellman gasped, then chuckled. “ That just goes to show what I was telling you, doesn't it ? We need each other's expertise. I'd have kept right on going past that obvious answer.”

“ What have I missed ?” Janet demanded.

“ The additive injectors. They are interchangeable one-gallon units, with a flexible armoured hose and a valve. Charge is three hundred pounds per square inch. They are ready-made spray-units, just as they stand.”

“ You unhook the charge-line from the base. There's a self-sealing ball-valve, there,” Logan explained, heavily. “ Then all you need is to make sure the outlet valve is shut, and break the flexible-hose connection at the injection point . . .” his voice faded into a shudder, and he clutched the edges of the table, grimly.

“ You'd better get back into your bunk, Barney,” Hellman advised. “ Come on. You're a sick man.”

He half-led, half-carried Logan to the bunk, helped him in and stood back. “ I'll give you something to make you sleep,” he decided. “ It's the best I can do off-hand. I'm no expert on exotic poisons and Lord only knows just what they put in rocket-fuel.”

“ Don't forget . . .” Logan whispered, strainingly, “. . . don't forget the pressure !”

It was all of three hours later, when Hellman had just finished disconnecting four charged additive-tanks, that the significance of Logan's words struck home. He took the far end of the cable, looped it round the tanks, leaving a big gap between each, and tugged at the free end, which led up the shaft. At the other end of that line Janet began hauling away, and he steered the tanks into the shaft, one at a time. Then he followed, to where she was shuffling them into a pile by the air-lock.

" Pressure," he said. " We can't go, just yet. I shall have to think."

" What ?" she asked, curiously, and he told her.

" If we go out there with one of these each, and start squirting, we'll be thrusting ourselves all over the place. Reaction. Get it ?"

" What will we do ?"

" We'll have to anchor ourselves, somehow. Look, it's a while since we ate. You fix that. I'm going to root out every foot of cable I can find. We have miles of it, here and there. And hooks."

They were squatting by the table, sucking and swallowing, deep in thought, when she ventured another comment.

" The spray," she said, hesitantly. " Must we cover the whole outside surface ? I mean, the only part that matters is where the sun strikes direct, isn't it ? Blackening the rest won't help at all."

" That's true, of course. But if we're toppling . . .?"

" Well ? Look, so far as I can figure it, the sun is striking the berg on an equatorial zone, a kind of tropical belt, if you like. All we need to do is blacken that area all the way round."

" Ah !" he said. " But how can we mark out just the area we want ? That surface up there is trackless, as far as we're concerned."

" We won't have to. I've been doing some more figuring. That vent-hole where we come out is right in the middle of the path. The first sighting I took, the sun went overhead, and I remember thinking, if we were to walk along we could have kept it in sight all the way round. So why can't we do that ?"

" Because we have to find our way back to the hole," Hellman said, but his mind had veered off on to something else. " More figures," he muttered, as the picture began to take shape in his mind. " A secured and anchored safety line from the ship's lock, up to the surface the way we go, then clear

round the berg, and secured—how long would that be ?" She blinked a moment, shut her eyes, mumbled to herself.

" Call it ninety feet diameter, by three point one four—is two eight three, roughly. Plus forty-five, is three hundred and twenty-eight feet."

" Call it three thirty. Then, if we have a line each, say fifteen feet, on a running loop, like a dog-lead on a wire, we can go round and round the outside without any danger of getting lost or taking off. And we have that much line, here, and more."

Three busy hours later. Hellman stood by the rim of the hole, with a short com-line connecting him to Janet. Far below, they hoped, Barney was fast asleep. She was clinging to an alloy bar which they had, together, struggled to wedge across the mouth of the hole, about a foot below the surface. A loop of cable fell away from it, down to the air-lock. The rest of the cable was coiled and resting on the ice. Janet had a loop of it round a wrench, in her gloved hands. The other end was securely bolted to Hellman's suit-belt. On his back he had the clumsy bulk of an additive-tank.

" Let's get this absolutely right," he said, carefully, " as we will be out of contact with each other until I come round again. We should see the sun, up over that spike, any minute now. When it shows, I'll start. You duck down out of the way of the spray. I'll back off—the spray will push me—and I'll try to keep the sun just in sight as I go. All being well, I should be round this way again in three and a half hours. Any questions?"

" If your spray runs out before you get round . . .?"

" I walk back along the cable. Or, if I reckon I'm a lot more than half way round, I'll jump for it. The cable will hold me from taking off altogether I reckon. And the black patch will make for easy marking. Whatever happens, you stay here. Do *not* try to come after me. You hear ?"

" That's the bit I don't like," she said, " but all right. Only, don't go breaking a leg, or bashing in your helmet, will you ?"

" It's my neck," he said, evenly. " I'll break contact, now, and back off a bit. See you in three and a half hours."

He pulled out the cable-com, moved away from the hole up the slope, waving her to duck down. The anchor cable trailed in the ice-dust. He gripped the flexible-hose end, pointed it at an angle, downwards, and then tilted his helmet back, waiting for the sun. There it came, a smoky red spot, seeming to leap

above the ice-edge. He gripped the valve, eased it open, and a dark fog bloomed from the end of the hose. For a moment, he was disconcerted. He had expected a directional spurt, not this ballooning cloud. Then he grinned, shook his head, and opened the valve a shade more, and the hose fought back against his grip, spinning him round.

Letting go the valve, he clamped both hands on the hose, forcing it down, and his feet left the ground. He fell, backwards, hit the ice, with the fog up in space above him. Desperately, he groped for the valve, wrenched it shut, and got to his feet again. And he couldn't see a thing but shifting darkness. A moment of panic shook him, then, setting his teeth, he bent the hose straight down, twisted the valve open, and strained to hold the hose stiff. He could have shouted with relief when he broke through the cloud, to see the sun again, and the rapidly thinning black cloud beneath him.

Getting something of the feel of it, he moved the hose very very slightly upwards, away from a vertical thrust, and managed to manoeuvre himself so that he could put his feet down clumsily on the high peak farthest away from where he had begun. Then he stopped a moment to regroup his faculties. He could see the cloud he had left behind him. It was dispersing, rather than settling. And there was no appreciable difference in the ground-tint of the ice-dust surface. He thought, hard. Extra G-force, here, would help, but was out of the question. If they wound up the ship's G, even as far as three times Earth-normal, it would make very little difference, at this distance. And it wasn't practical, anyway. You couldn't operate for very long under a constant 3-G.

Also, it was no help at all to direct the jet downwards. That merely served to thrust him up. It didn't throw the stuff down, not more than the first inch or two. Beyond that point it just dispersed, explosively, in all directions. He watched the sun climb up, and pondered. Then, shrugging, he decided to make the best of it. Taking aim over his shoulder at the next prominence, he crouched, kicked off backwards, and eased open the valve as he went, using the jet to give him added push horizontally. It wasn't quite so disconcerting, now, since he was already floating, to feel the kick-thrust of the jetting oil. And he managed to steer, clumsily, so that he made his landfall quite close to where he had intended. Then he stopped again, and waited for the sun.

He became so engrossed in the effort, the kick-off backwards and the struggle to direct the jet just right to steer where he wanted to go, that he had completely lost track of time. It was by sheer chance that he saw, in one backward glance, a tiny movement, over to his left. When he looked again, he realised that it was Janet, waving frantically to him. He waved back, then looked incredulously at his chronometer. Then, from the peak where he was poised, he surveyed the area. That, there, was where he had begun. It ought to appear a shade or two darker. It looked not one damn bit different. The black fog was gone, truly, but that was all. So much for a smart idea. He shrugged, adjusted his aim, and jumped, jetting expertly by this time, to land with a skid about four feet from the hole.

" I can't see where it has made any difference," he told her, as soon as they were linked again. " We haven't enough gravity to hold the particles down. They are just dissipating off into space." Then, as if listening to the echo of what he had just said, he cursed himself. " That can't be right, damn it. There's enough G here for me to feel that I'm standing upright. That stuff has *got* to settle out. It doesn't make sense otherwise."

" How much did you use ?" she asked, and pulled him round so that she could read the meter on the tank. " It still reads three-quarters full, here."

" Three-quarters ? Then that's it ! A quarter of a gallon wouldn't make anything to show, not over that area. That's it ! But . . ." he paused, and she sensed the trouble in his voice.

" What now ?"

" We'll have to figure out some better way. This won't do. That jet is enough to knock you off your feet, just eased off. And we can't keep on going round. Our suits will run out."

They went back to the ship in silence, first having made a secure fastening to retain their equatorial belt in place. Hellman, for the first time, began to give serious consideration to the possibility that they might not get out of this. So far, he had been content to focus on the immediate objective and leave the long-term problems to be dealt with when they came up. But the list of possibilities was rapidly becoming exhausted.

" It seems so silly," Janet complained. " We have the stuff. All we need is some way of spreading it around. And yet we can't !"

" Try not to go at it too hard," he advised. " Let it slip for a while. Try to think of something else . . ."

They found Logan fast asleep, and breathing heavily. Hellman took a pulse and temperature reading, and shook his head, ruefully.

" He's sick, but that's not saying anything helpful. The best we can do is keep him resting, feed him regularly, and hope. And we could take something to make us sleep, too. It will help conserve energy, if nothing else. We may have to go on short rations eventually."

He dispensed tablets, took himself off to his seat in the control-cabin, and settled down with his pipe. A glance at his chronometer showed him they had passed thirty-six hectic hours since that first crash. A day and a half. They had plenty of time. Too damned much time, if they were just going to sit round and wait for it. Just letting it happen.

That same phrase was still circling, sluggishly, through his mind as he woke. It reverberated as if it had an importance all its own. Just letting it happen. And then he had it—or thought he had. Recharging his pipe, he set himself to think it through step by step. That ridiculous failure with the jet-spray mustn't be allowed to happen again. But this time, so far as he could see, it ought to work. He struggled, stiffly, out of his seat and went back to the mess-room. Janet was fast asleep still, her head hanging over the edge of the bunk, her jet-black hair drooping like a raven's wing waterfall. He touched her, gently, easing her head back into comfort. She murmured, rolled over, but didn't wake. Then he saw that Logan was watching him, silently.

" How d'you feel ?" he whispered.

" Like a piece of wet string," Logan whispered back. " What's up with me, Marsh ? Did I catch something ?"

" I don't know, for sure, but the best guess is that you're poisoned in some fashion, from that fuel you drank. You'd best lie still and take it easy. You want anything ?"

" Shot of coffee wouldn't do any harm, would it ?"

" I can fix that, sure. I'll have one myself." Hellman heated up the bulbs, brought one back to the bunk. " Barney, how many of those additive-injectors do we carry, altogether?"

" Dozen in use. Three clusters of four. And half a dozen spares. But they're empty. Need charging. Marsh—you reckon I'm going to die ?"

" Not unless we all do. I don't know any poisons that take as long as this to work. You'll get better." He told Logan of the fiasco with the jet-spray idea, and then his improved version.

" You sure the stuff will settle ?"

" It's bound to. The ice-dust settles, doesn't it ? All I have to do is pump it out there. The snag is that eighteen gallons won't be enough."

" Do 'em by nines, and I can be recharging the empties. That doesn't take a lot of effort. I can manage it."

" We'll try to do without that, Barney. You just rest, now. I'm going to get the rest of them disconnected." Hellman made his way to the power-deck and got busy with spanners, disconnecting the remaining tanks.

" What are you up to, now ?" Janet demanded, dropping down by him as he started the third cluster. " I thought the spray idea was a bust ?"

" So it is. Look, you pass a line round the lot, and haul them up to the lock, while I get the last four loose."

" You've taken off the hoses," she said, looking at the bottle-shapes.

" That's right. Won't need them. You'll see."

An hour later, with fresh charges in their suits, they set out once again on the climb up to the surface. This time, Janet went in front, with the line to guide and help her and the ship's G-unit switched off, so that the effort was minimal. As she went, she trailed a bead-string of tanks, all twelve of them, with Hellman bringing up the rear and anxiously trying to steer the wandering masses in a reasonably straight line. Out on the surface they rehearsed their plan of action carefully.

" By guesswork," he said, " we hope to space these out, evenly, all the way round. First of all, we pass our com-line under the equatorial cable. That way we can't get parted from each other. Then we snap-hook on to it as well, just to make sure. And then we start walking. Right ?"

They toiled up the slope, dragging the string of cans, struggling to get enough foot-grip to overcome the mass they were dragging, using the boundary-line as much as they could, although it was difficult to grip through their thick gloves. Then, when he guessed they'd gone far enough, he called a halt.

" We're down in a hole, here," he said. " Probably the best place. Now, we unhook one tank, make it fast to the equator-

line . . ." he struggled with the thin cable, got it safely looped and hitched round the tank. ". . . and then we just turn it on . . ." he waved her to go ahead, until she was as far away as the com-line would permit, and then opened the valve.

In seconds it was as dark as dusk and only the line in his hand gave him any idea which way to go. He groped along, warning her to keep going ahead. It took some ten minutes of slipping and slithering before he could see again. They went on, setting up the tanks at guesswork intervals, not stopping to see whether they were achieving anything.

" We're up against time," he warned her, as they disengaged the eleventh tank, and made it fast to the line. " We have about an hour and a half to get the rest of the way round and back to the ship. And I haven't the foggiest idea where we are." He made the loop fast, waved her on, up a slope, and twisted the valve. As the sooty cloud boiled out round him, he heard her call.

" We made it, Marsh ! We made it. You wait 'till you get up here! It's like a roadway!" He clung to the line, scrambled up the slope and out of the gloom, to where she was standing, pointing. " There !" she said, unnecessarily. He could see it, at once. In a broad swath, it was as if a dark shadow had fallen across the grey-green.

" Now . . ." she said, as they hauled themselves down the line back to the ship. " Now—if only it works !"

" What d'you mean, *if* it works ? Why shouldn't it ?"

" Well, even if the temperature does go up enough to evaporate the ice, it will boil off, won't it ?"

" That's right. Zero pressure."

" Won't the carbon-black boil off along with it ?" She reached for the air-lock button, disconnected the com-line, and he had to wait until they were inboard to counter her point.

" That won't happen," he assured her. " You see, the ice will come off as single molecules of H_2O. Whereas the carbon particles are considerably heavier and will tend to settle. At any rate, they ought to, and I'm going to wind up our G-field as much as I can, just to make sure."

" Where's Barney ?" she gasped, as they slid into the mess-room, to find his bunk empty. Hellman, guessing, made for the power-deck hurriedly.

"He was trying to charge up some more cans," he explained, as she tumbled after him and went on her knees beside the prone form of the engineer. " We'd better get him back to his bunk. This hasn't done him any good at all. Damn it all to hell, I can't put on that extra G now, not the way he is."

" Let's get him settled," she said, " and then perhaps we can try it. It shouldn't make too much difference if he's lying down. He seems to be breathing all right." They got Logan back into his bunk and stretched out. Janet eyed him, worriedly. " I don't like to leave him," she said. " Can I stay here and still be in touch ?"

" There's a com unit right over your head," Hellman pointed it out. " You get in and lie down. I'll get myself settled in control. I can remote the G-unit from there. You let me know if he shows signs of trouble."

Safely in his padded seat, Hellman moved the switch to start up the pseudo-gravity generator and advanced it slowly. The meter was calibrated in feet-per-second acceleration. He watched it drift up to thirty and beyond, steadily, as he wound the control. Two-G was bearable for anyone properly seated, or prone, but it was hard work if you had to do anything entailing movement.

" Marsh !" Janet's voice crackled in the speaker. " He's beginning to snort. I don't think he can take this very long."

" All right. I'll set it back to Earth-norm." Hellman reduced the drag, went back to the mess-room. She was just climbing out as he got there. " That's it, then," he shrugged. " Even just by being here, our Barney is dragging a load on our chances. Damn him !" and he felt that homicidal rage come back with a rush. " People !" he said, bitterly. " Give me machinery every time !"

" That's a rotten thing to say !"

" Oh, sure. And that was a noble thing he did, getting himself stupid-drunk on rocket-fuel. Wasn't it ? You're a right smart pair, between you. I still say, give me machinery every time. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a job to do," and he went off to the power-deck, fuming inwardly, to busy himself with the job Logan had tried to do, charging the spare tanks with additive-fluid. By the time he'd finished, it was time to eat.

* * *

Chapter Six

Twenty-four dragging hours later, the atmosphere had changed not at all. Logan was still unconscious and Hellman was still bitter. Janet made one abortive effort at reconciliation.

" There's no sense in staying angry with us, Marsh, is there ?"

" Whether I'm angry, pleased, or downright sick of the pair of you, it doesn't make a damned bit of difference to what is going to happen. Try and get that through your head. I'm used to dealing with hard facts, not the way somebody happens to be feeling at the moment. I'll leave that kind of worry to you. I reckon it's about time those tanks were inspected again. I'm going up there. I'm going to take the six full ones with me. Now—what are *you* going to do ?" She hesitated, looked from him to Logan, uncertainly.

" I don't like to leave him . . ."

" Suppose you're here, and he dies—what can you do ?"

" Nothing—I suppose. But somebody ought to be here. It isn't right to go off and leave him all alone. It isn't right !"

The blistering retort that came to his lips never reached utterance. All at once the deck lurched under his feet, sending him staggering. Then there was a mighty rumbling clang, jarring the whole fabric of the ship.

" It's a 'quake !" he snapped. " The berg is breaking up !" He dived for the shaft, en route to the air-lock. Scrambling into a suit, he triggered the air-lock and the ship lurched again as it cycled open. Inside, he fidgeted as the outer door spun, then, gingerly, he leaned out and stared. There, in the beam from his headlamp, he could see a great irregular slab keeling over with massive slowness, and the surrounding space was alive with glittering patches of ice-dust, as if a swarm of fire-flies had invaded the dark. It would have been stark insanity to go out there now. He ducked back, spun the outer door shut, went back to where she waited by Logan's side.

" We shall just have to sit tight and wait it out," he said, grimly. " The melting has upset the general balance of the thing. It could go on collapsing in on itself for quite a long time. Or it might settle. Who knows ?"

There was something else, but he kept it to himself. Nothing would be gained by frightening her more than necessary. He went back to his seat in the control cabin and made his board alive, watching the gauges and meters surge into registration.

Apart from its armoured nose, Rainmaker IV was not meant to take battering punishment, and it was by no means unlikely that one of those tottering masses might drive a tearing patch clear through the outer hull. It was not uncommon for a berg to shatter under strain when it was being nudged from some critical angle, and it was the captain's job to be on the alert for flying fragments.

Right now, as he watched his indicators and felt the jump and surge of the ship every now and again, he realised that he was a captain without a job. He could do nothing but sit here and wait for it helplessly. He switched to rear-view again and made a more thorough check of the lines. Still no pictures, but the angle and focus control seemed to be working, so the camera-modules had not been ripped away bodily. He swung round, reaching for a store-list, feeling the ship lurch again heavily. More to occupy his mind than anything else, he scanned the list, refreshing his memory. He had enough to replace three complete view-units ; enough spares to refit all the atti-jets, from the outside, at least.

" Marsh !" Janet's voice broke in on his studies. " Can you come. I think Barney is going !"

" I'll be right there," he said, resignedly. When he reached the mess-room, she was on her knees by the bunk and Logan was very quiet. Hellman brushed her aside, took a wrist, bent his head close to listen. Then he reached to pat her on the shoulder.

" Nothing to worry about. In fact, he's better now than he has been ever since he went down. His pulse is steady and he's breathing regularly. He's weak, I reckon, but I'd say the crisis is over."

" You mean—he isn't going to die ?"

" I shouldn't think so. Not yet, anyway. Look, if you dig into that cupboard, you should find some dried milk. Make it up with warm water and sugar. It is already enriched. If he can hold that down, he'll be all right. I may be going outside, soon. The 'quake seems to be over."

He went back to control, just to check, and a flicker of movement caught his eye. One of the rear screens was showing life. He grabbed the control, edging it anxiously, and the blur smoothed out, became pin-point clear. Stars ! He dived for the shaft, and made for the lock, boxing up his suit as he went. A solid slab of ice met his gaze as the outer door swung in. Hesitating only a moment, he seized the circular combing, got

his feet to the ice and shoved manfully. And it moved, slowly, and went bowling away out into the dark.

He put his head out, thought a moment, ducked back in again and seized a three-foot pinch-bar that hung by clips on the bulkhead. Then he went right out, secured his line and com-link, and began making his way aft along the hull. It was like forcing a way through a tunnel of diamonds, except that the masses lifted ponderously up and spun heavily away into the dark as he levered at them with the bar. Then, as if looking out from the bottom of a funnel, he could see the stars. Better still, he could see the whole of the stern, clear and free.

" Janet !" he called, tensely. " You hear me ?"

" Yes. What ?" she sounded weary.

" I'm outside, along aft. I can see the stern. It's all clear of ice, for the moment, anyway."

" We're free ? We can blast ?"

" We could, at once. But there's a bit of damage that ought to be put right first. Some of the cameras and the atti-jets. I don't know how bad they are until I've checked. I'll let you know."

This, he thought, as he scrambled clumsily about the vent manifold, this is the time when we could use Barney. But he won't be any help the way he is, so I shall just have to make a fist at it myself. He reviewed, mentally, the gear he would need to wrench out the twisted and battered tubes and fit new ones, to winkle out the camera-units from their recesses. What would be a couple of days' work for a competent engineer might take him all of a week, without counting the hazard of rogue-ice chunks drifting about. He completed his inspection and went back inboard. Barney was still asleep and Janet looked as if she might drop, any minute.

" You get some sleep," he advised. " You're going to have to lie down, anyway, so make the most of it. I'm going to try to pull free of this mess. I think I have enough atti-jets to move us backwards. It will be touch-and-go, but you can't help, anyway. So climb in and rest. I'll let you know how it goes."

He spent an hour in a tedious but thorough check round the power-deck. Then, satisfied that everything was as ' go ' as he could make it, he went back to control, feeling better than he had done in days. This was the job he could do. He was functioning again. He checked his panel, settled himself, flexed his fingers, and gave the first trial burst on the jets. Noise thrummed through the hull. Familiar noise.

He switched to forward view, cut in the arc-lights, advanced the jet-thrust and he could feel movement along with a cacophony of scraping and grinding. And then he had pictures forward. He was backing clear. The ship handled clumsily, worse than he had ever known it, but it handled. An hour later, with growing expertness in the managing of a few hard-working jets, he was able to swing round and get a full view, from about fifty yards clear, of the jagged berg as a whole. It was little more than a black shadow against the star-field, with just a rim of glitter on one side, where the distant sun caught it. Carefully, going by feel and sight as much as by instruments, he matched the ship's motion to the berg, so that they hung in stillness with relation to each other.

That, he thought, with satisfaction, ought to do it, for the moment. The next thing was to get busy with those repairs. He set his panel to ' safe ' and went to thrust himself out of his seat. And then he realised just how weary he was. Crawling stiffly out of control and into the shaft, he forced himself to admit that the very next thing was rest. It would be the act of a fool, now, to struggle along with dangerous work outside, when his faculties were blurred by fatigue. Back in the mess-room, Janet was fast asleep—and again, Logan was lying quiet, but awake. Hellman gave him the current position, while he made coffee and a scrap-meal and some more milk.

" Do I have to drink that stuff ?"

" You do. You can think yourself lucky you're drinking anything any more."

" I guess I fouled things up, didn't I ?"

" Never mind that. You can help. You just give me some pointers on re-fitting external tubes to the atti-jets. It's a long time since I did anything in that line."

" Better still, why can't I talk to you, while you're out there? And Janet could help, too. It's simple enough, once you get the idea. Say, that oil-spray idea did work, then ?"

" It must have done. I think there's something big, there, if we can only see it in the right perspective. At the moment, I'm too damn tired to be able to think about anything . . ."

" Here, you climb in my bunk," Logan sat up. " You're not getting proper rest in that bucket-seat up in control. On a quarter-G, I can shuffle around all right, and I can look out the gear all ready for you."

Hellman allowed himself to be persuaded, chiefly because he really did need the sleep. By the time he struggled back to wakefulness again, Logan had managed to lay out everything he would need, and Janet had been busy taking sights.

" It's a lot easier, with the full-scale stuff," she said, as she laid out a meal, " but it doesn't do much for our chances, just the same. We are still on the same course."

" I think we will be able to change that, once we're fully functional. And there are one or two other things we can do. I disconnected our end of the cable, but it should still be looped round the berg, unless some chance chunk has parted it. I'd like to collect and refuel those tanks. That melting trick has given me an idea. You were up in control. Did you notice anything ?"

" The haze, you mean ? I imagine we're passing through an ion cloud, or something like that."

" You saw it—when ? About half-an-hour ago, say ? And I saw it well before I went to sleep. That's not something we're passing through. That is the vapour from the berg. The way I figure it, right now, that berg is still the centre of gravity, for the whole mass, and even if we can evaporate *all* of it, there will still be a centre of gravity for the resulting vapour cloud. Just as soon as we are capable of efficient manoeuvring, I propose to go alongside, renew those tanks and then you will have the job of computing an entirely new path for us—the faster the better."

" You mean—we'll just cut loose and head back for Mars and leave the ice to drift ? ' Rain ' H.Q. isn't going to like that."

" No, Barney, not leave the ice. We are going to head for Mars, sure, just as soon as we can, but the ice will go with us. More accurately, it will trail along after us. If we do it right, that is. That will be up to our navigator !"

Excitement, interest and renewed hope made very effective stimulants, but there was no escape from sheer hard work. There were three camera-units to be coaxed out of their protective housings and replaced, and forty-three bent and distorted jet-tubes to be wrenched out and renewed. Hellman lost all track of time in the monotonous task, in the seemingly endless routine of clip-on-and-heave with the chain-wrench, snag the battered metal to a line, steer the new tube home and then clip-on-and-heave all over again, with enforced breaks for meals and a new suit-charge. But it was done at last, and he was able to feel the proper surge and response from his controls as he tried them out.

Putting the ship alongside the berg was a matter of old skills and old tricks that he had done many times before. The glowing tail was plainly visible now. Barney sat in control, watching it, while Hellman and Janet took out full tanks on a line, and retrieved the empties. The line was unbroken and slack. They hauled it taut as best they could and lashed the spurting tanks to it.

" Anybody spots this from Mars," Logan declared, " they're going to think it's a bloody comet, for sure."

" If they try to compute its orbit, they'll go raving mad," Hellman chuckled. " We've put a couple of lines out, by way of a trial. I reckon we can tow the thing, if we're careful, and the jet-blast will help to melt it even faster. We can save some of the additive after all !"

With Logan back on his power-deck, weak but willing, and Janet settled by her plot, Hellman felt the beginnings of jubilation. Rear-view on. Atti-jets whispering. The star-field wheeling past. G-field stable at thirty-two.

" Attitude and velocity, when you're ready," he said, briskly, and she read out figures to him. He caressed his controls. Gently, very gently at first, to take up the strain on the bales, then with more and more thrust as they gained momentum. From the rear-cameras they could see the streaming halo of the ice-dust. Then, with a growing confidence, he was able to fire the main drive and feel the muted thunder throbbing back through the hull. Now the berg and its halo flared into a gaudy fireball. Keeping a sharp eye on the tube temperatures, he held the thrust as long as was safe, then cut it off.

" That's that," he said, flatly. " How do you read us now?"

" First approximation," she mumbled, frowning at her meters. " It looks all right. On this projection, we should make intersection with Mars in something over thirtysix hours . . ." her mumble died. It was as if she had spoken without listening to herself, as if she now heard it for the first time. " Marsh !" her voice cracked with the relief of sudden acceptance. " Marsh—we're going to make it ! We're going to be all right ! I can hardly believe it !" She turned to him, and he saw her lip quiver and her eyes flood with tears.

" Now, now," he rebuked her, gently. " You've done very well, so far. Don't go and spoil it at the last minute . . ." Close packed as they were, her face was very close to his.

" Oh, Marsh !" she choked, " if it hadn't been for you . . ." and then her arm was round his neck and her lips on his. He held quite still for a moment, then, as gently as he could, he pushed her away.

" I wasn't looking for rewards," he said, softly. " I was saving my own neck, as well as yours. Besides, we were all in on it. You did your bit. You did very well. Barney is a very lucky man."

" Barney !"she breathed, holding her head back to stare at him. " But—oh, I don't know what to think. The way I feel, right now . . ."

" Is not the best state of mind for making important judgments," he put in, smiling. " You take a moment to think it over. Look, we're all right now. We are going to survive. That's great, for the moment. But you have a whole life-time ahead. This is just a moment. Gratitude, relief, that's understandable. I feel a bit light-headed myself. There were moments, back there, when I wouldn't have given a snap for our chances of getting through."

" But Barney ?" she sighed. " I've changed, about him . . ."

" You'll change a lot more, most likely. No man is a god, you know. He's no worse, and a lot better, than most. You've seen something of his weaknesses, true. But he's been at a disadvantage, in a hopeless situation—nothing he could do. Any man is liable to crack in a case like that."

" You didn't !"

" May you never know just how nearly I did, here and there," he assured her, soberly. " Besides, I *like* challenges. That's why I've stayed with the ' rain-run ' for ten years. This is life, to me. I'd never want to live any other way." He watched her face, saw the change in her expression as her strong commonsense took charge. " I hate being dependent on people," he went on. "Remember, when you thought Barney might die . . .?" She nodded, sighed, managed a smile.

" I guess you're right," she said, wistfully. " He *is* a chump, but I think I would have died, too, if he hadn't got well. Thanks, Marsh, for being so sensible. You're awfully wise, you know. It's just a pose, saying you don't understand about people . . ."

" I prefer machines," he said, firmly. " You have another check of our course figures, please, just to make sure." When she had wiped her eyes, and rechecked, and confirmed the good news, he flipped the intercom.

" It's all right, Barney. We're clear. Should contact Mars in thirty-six hours or so. You can relax."

" That's the best news I've heard in days. Not that I've got anything to feel proud of. Hadn't been for you, Marsh . . ."

" Forget that," Hellman ordered. " We were all in it together. There's a point, though, that you both seem to have missed. We've done more than just pull through. I think we have just discovered a very important technique. Unless I am very much mistaken, H.Q., is going to be greatly interested in this black-and-melt idea. With a bit of refinement, it should take a lot of the heartache out of the ' rain-run.' They ought to be grateful !"

" God ! You figure we'll get a reward ?"

" I don't see why not. And it will make a handy wedding present for you two . . ." Janet smiled, but the intercom from the power-deck was silent. Then Logan spoke, with awkward difficulty.

" I reckon that wasn't such a funny joke, Marsh. I know I've fumbled myself out of any chances I ever had . . ."

" Barney Logan !" Janet interrupted, warmly, " You can get that idea right out of your head. I'm as good as compromised, right now, after stowing away on this ship just to be with you. You can't let me down now !"

" Eh ?" it came as a strangled gasp through the speaker. " Janet, you don't mean . . .? After what I did ?"

" We're all human, Barney," Hellman chuckled. " Even me, if you'll excuse me saying it. You join us in the mess-room, right away, and I'll pour you out something that *won't* curdle your insides. I've saved it, for medicinal reasons, for years. This seems as good a time as any. And you'd better clean up a bit, while I read up on the marriage service."

" Marriage service ?"

" That's what I said. I am a Captain, after all, and this is a space-faring vessel within the meaning of the act . . ."

Seventy-two hours later, as he made final course-corrections, Janet, by his side, switched on the radio-sender circuit.

" Rainmaker Four to Mars Platform One," she called. " R.M. IV to M.P. One—requesting data and clearance to come alongside, please,"

" M.P. One to R.M. IV . . ." an agitated voice rattled back at her. " Can you orbit and hang on ? All facilities presently engaged in observing highly irregular, possibly dangerous, comet ! Can you hang on ?"

" R.M. IV to M.P. One," Hellman reached for the mike. " This is Captain Hellman speaking. Kindly observe that we are—repeat—we *are* the comet !"

John Rackham

The watcher's job was a fairly simple one—to break up any alien invasion by superior beings; and, for this, he was equipped with powerful weapons. Unfortunately, when he visited Earth, his main weapon had been withdrawn.

PLACEBO

by ALAN BURNS

Chapter One

A fingernail could have covered the moor on the map, but at night, with the bottom torn out of my hovercar by a rock, it was a big and lonely place. In the light from the car's panel I studied the map. The garage I'd called over the car radio had regretted that they couldn't do any night towing, and suggested I make myself comfortable until the morning, but the freezing wind howled under the lifted bonnet and through the hole in the keelplate. There would be no comfort in staying with the car. The map showed a small town ten kilometres away, I had heavy boots and a raincloak, a good torch and a compass, I decided to walk.

The wind outside the car tore at me like a living thing, raindrops danced in the beam from the torch, but not ten metres from the wreck I came on to the remains of what must have been a secondary road a hundred years since, when cars still had wheels, and gratefully I followed it. The storm screamed even louder. As a watcher I took little account of it, but the day had been long and very frustrating, so when I saw a light to the left I decided to ask for shelter till the morning. In the light from my torch I saw that it was an

old bothy, or deerstalker's hut, obviously too far away from anywhere for Area Housing to bother replacing it by something new. I knocked at the door and entered for it was open.

" God save all here," I said, using the conventional Scots greeting.

" God save you kindly," answered the woman seated silhouetted against the fire. " A black night for any to attempt the Moor," she added without looking up from a simmering cauldron. " You would be going far ?"

" To the town," I answered and explained what had happened.

" Small comfort you'd find so late on a Sunday evening. They are God-fearing people. Better you bide here till morning."

" Thanks. I can pay for what I receive, either in money or service."

" Neither of which I need. I seek only understanding."

I looked around the room, at the big press, showing ancient books through its open doors. At the bunches of herbs and mummified animals hanging from the ceiling. Witchcraft still flourished in lonely parts of the world despite the massive literacy and educational programme, and evidently this was an outpost of it.

Sympathetically I said, " Few will give you that, mother. Science has taken what's useful in your art, and outlawed the rest."

" Mother ?" she laughed softly and stood up. I saw that I had been mistaken about her age, she was a fine figure of a strong Scots girl, in her late twenties, as I was.

" Have you a name ?" she asked. " Or are you scared to give it ?"

" It's said where trust is, enchantment isn't," I smiled. " I am called George, George Tolland. And you ?"

" Margaret Fraser. Friends shorten my first name to Meg." A bitter puff of wind rattled the door. " An ill night indeed," she went on, " your business must have been urgent, even with a hovercar. Usually only doctors and such as I go abroad when the weather is so."

" For the same reason ?" I ventured.

" Some prefer me to the doctor," she said. " The simple folk believe in what I say, and think better of my brews and drenches than packets of pills from the World Health Authority."

" Some say," I remarked, " that witches deal in placebos and credulity."

" At least a placebo is harmless," she answered. " Doctors use them today even. A red colour in some water, a placebo, but it cures hypochondria better than broad-spectrum antibiotics. But what is it to you—and your urgent business ?" It was a direct question, and I decided that she would use the truth intelligently.

" I'm a watcher," I said. " Out there are wrongdoers. Until I lost my weapon it was my duty to apprehend them. Now the best I can do is to keep an eye on them until I find a replacement weapon. I know there is something strange in this district. I was drawn to it."

" I see," she remarked thoughtfully. " Now would a watcher be interested in a great flash that lit up the moor some months since ?"

" He might," I answered. Anything more was interrupted as the door banged open and a great gaunt Scotsman came in.

" Bring a spoon and a bowl from the press, Andrew," she said carefully. " I will put porage in your bowl, you will eat it slowly because it is hot." I watched with interest. Saying nothing the big man went to the press and took out a wooden bowl and a spoon. It was promptly filled from the cauldron, and milk poured on from a stone pitcher. The man stood in the middle of the room and ate mechanically, when there was no more left he still stood. My hostess said:

" Andrew, you will wash your bowl and spoon at the tap and put them away in the press. Then you will go to your shed and lie down." He did exactly as he had been instructed, and when he was gone she bolted the door behind him. She looked at me.

" That porage smells good," I said. I felt sure she heaved an inward sigh of relief. From the press she brought dishes and utensils, put them on the table and served the porage. From a locked cupboard she brought a bottle that looked as if it held whisky and said,

" Some say a little of this improves porage and keeps the cold out."

" It's probably true," I agreed. As I ate, dipping spoonfuls of porage into a bowl of milk in the Scots fashion, I let my thoughts weave around the affairs of the evening. As a watcher I had seen many strange things, and somehow the

great ugly man's almost robotic manner struck a responsive chord. I knew of course that despite medical care by the state section of the World Health Authority, an occasional feeble mind was at large, but our late visitor gave an impression not so much of idiocy as of emptiness. I began fishing among dim pieces of knowledge at the back of my mind, and as I washed my bowl and spoon at the sink I wondered if he had any connection with the flash on the moor. He might be a relative of my hostess, kept at the bothy so that he would not be institutionalised.

I was roused from my thoughts when she said " I have only the settle for you. But there's a plaid and a sheepskin that will give you warmth enough for one night, I've no doubt."

" You're more than kind, Miss Fraser."

" I said a while back that friends shorten my first name to Meg, I count you as such."

" Thank you, Meg. I'll arrange the settle if you'll bank down the peat fire. I might put it out."

" You would know our customs it seems."

" I make a point of knowing the ways of wherever I am. You can call me George if you wish."

" An honest enough Christian name for a watcher—George." Skilfully she bedded down the fire with pieces of turf, reducing its heart to a dim glow, and I was surprised how much its light had added to the two candles. She took one of the candlesticks and disappeared behind a curtain that ran alongside a bed in the room corner. I got up and blew my candle out, then settled myself down for the night. Presently the glow from the other went out and I heard Meg get into bed.

I sleep lightly, the least sound out of the ordinary wakens me, so when I heard the faint muttering I got up.

" No, Andrew, just one minute, here is drink, good drink. Take it now and you'll feel fine. Yes, Andrew, drink it down, don't you feel wonderful ?" I moved over to the bed, Meg was talking in her sleep, her head moving from side to side. Gently I took her hand. It clasped mine convulsively then she seemed to settle down. I went back to my bed and was no further disturbed.

The storm went with the night, for when I woke up the bothy was full of sunlight, and Meg was busily sweeping the floor with a typical witch-type besom.

" Good morning to you," she said, pausing in her work. " It would seem you have slept well. While you wash, I'll cook you some breakfast, then you can get on your way." As I cleaned up Meg busied herself with a frying pan, and presently I was seated down to a good breakfast that would set any man on his road. Finally I said, " Are you sure that you won't take pay, Meg ?"

" Thank you no. I must ask you to leave now, a morning's walk should bring you to the town. Muckle's Garage there will arrange for your car to be repaired."

" Will I see you again ?" I asked.

" As our paths happen to cross."

" Then let me thank you for your hospitality, and give you such advice as I may. A trouble shared is a trouble halved, and when your sleep of nights becomes too uneasy seek me out for comfort." She watched me go.

" Haste ye back," she called after me.

Against the background of a brilliant morning, with all the birds of the moor singing, the events of the night before seemed distant and almost unreal. I put my best foot forward and was soon entering the little town of Moraig. It was the sort of town that the Scots specialise in, big enough for all amenities, but small enough for everyone to know everyone. I had made a booking at the *North Star* hotel for the previous night, so I went there first, and explained why I hadn't arrived.

" We feared for you crossing the Moor, Mr. Tolland," said the manager. " Bad people live there, and folk have had strange things happen to them. You were ill-advised to attempt it. How did you pass the night ?"

" I was given shelter in a bothy," I told him. " Miss Margaret Fraser received me hospitably."

" I'll thank you not to mention that woman's name under my roof, Mr. Tolland," he said. " I'm a God-fearing man man and a kirk elder, but with that witch I would not have commerce for all the money she is reputed to have."

" Now look here," I exclaimed laughing, " this is the twenty-first century and we laugh at such moonshine. Just because a girl chooses to live by herself and practice naturopathy and folk medicine that doesn't make her a witch."

" There are two counts against her. First she comes of evil blood and not a few of her ancestors were burnt at the stake.

Secondly she is known to have bewitched Andrew McDonald, turning him from an honest shepherd into her creature."

" Well I don't know what to make of it," I said. " However I don't suppose I'll see her again. I'll have lunch and then go round to the garage to arrange matters."

The meal was indifferent and not very well served, so I finished quickly and went out to the garage. As I walked through the town I guessed that in times past people like Meg would have had a hard time, but witchcraft had more or less been relegated to textbooks by the massive efforts of a World Government to enlighten its people and free them from the fears that so long beset them. Between the years 2000 and 2050 A.D. literacy shot up to ninety-five per cent of the population of the world, and in 2050 it was made an offence to be illiterate. Of course the books taught what the government wanted people to know and think, but the effort was commendable nonetheless, even if valuable teachings were locked up in the classified sections of the State Library Service.

Muckle's Garage was the usual Transport Authority establishment, but even its standardised buildings seemed to have acquired the grey and venerable air borne by the rest of the town. Mr. Muckle listened to my story then handed me over to the care of an intelligent-looking senior mechanic called Archie Fairlie.

" Looks like a long job, sir," he said. " Were I you I'd no' be looking for my car under three weeks."

" I'm in no hurry," I answered, " but I'd like to go out with you and pick up my luggage if I may."

" By all means. I'll just get out the salvager and we'll be off." In the cabin of the big hovertruck he said to me. "This might be impertinence, sir, but would you have any place to stay in Moraig ?"

" At the moment I'm at the *North Star*, but the quicker I'm out the better, I don't like it. But why do you ask ?"

" My son Jamie got married and moved away a week since. So his room is free. The wife fancies a boarder, having been in a hotel before we were married. To be honest the money would be useful. Our little girl Jeannie is very clever and we're planning to do the best we can for her."

" Fair enough," I said. " I'll call on your wife and see the room, then if I like it we'll discuss terms." The salvager was

just heading on to the moor when the radio buzzed. Archie picked up the phone.

" Salvager here, Fairlie speaking—my wife Mr. Muckle ? Yes I'll speak to her—Hello Mary—Jeannie you say—but what about getting the doctor ? Yes, I'll get Meg, as it happens I'm heading that way—all right, good-bye."

" Trouble ?" I asked sympathetically.

" Aye, it's Jeannie. We thought she had a bit of a cold this morning, so we kept her away from school. But it's got worse. My wife's like a lot of her friends, she likes Meg Fraser who lives on the moor. I'm not saying that Meg isn't good, but we're taxed for medical services so we may as well use them."

Chapter Two

In a very short time we came to Meg's bothy. Quickly Archie told her about Jeannie, and as we started up again I looked back and was in time to see her getting a hoverscooter out of a shed. We came to the car and Archie looked at it sympathetically.

" You've made a job of wrecking it, Mr. Tolland. I can see you're going to need almost a complete new blast-skirting, and since you could get no lift, that means your blast-arc unit's probably a write-off. Nothing we can't make as good as new, but it will take time. Well, I'll get the trestles on to her and we'll be getting back."

I gave him a hand to fix the emergency lift units, or 'trestles' as they are called, on to the towing eyes at front and rear of the car and then he connected up the pressure flexes to the blast supply unit on the rear of the salvager and switched on. Immediately there was a whine as the atomic convertor turned the niggard dribble of tritium atoms into D.C. and activated the electric arc to make the blast.

It was the convertor that had silenced hover vehicles and made them a practical proposition for ordinary use. True, the tritium was expensive, but a charge lasted a long time, and the laboratories were well on the way to turning hydrogen into its heaviest isotope on a commercial basis. With a screech of tortured metal my car lifted off the rocks as the trestles got the blast, and Archie quickly fastened a towing bar to it, then we were able to set off for Moraig.

I dropped my luggage off at the *North Star* and decided that since I was to be in Moraig for some time I might as well seek a post of some kind. I reported to the local Labour Authority Office. The many talents I had, included a fantastic ability to pass exams, so when I reeled off my strings of qualifications to a somewhat startled assignment officer, he asked me if I felt I wasn't wasting my time, coming to a little place like Moraig. I said that I wanted quietness and a change of air. He told me that my services could certainly be used by the firm who had taken over the distillery and were branching out into biological products. He phoned them up, they were at once interested and an appointment was arranged for that very afternoon. When I left the office I decided to call on Mrs. Fairlie to see if the room she had for rent was as good as her husband had claimed. I found the house quite easily and sure enough a card in a downstairs window advertised a room to rent. There was an old fashioned electric bell sound when I pressed the button on the door, and in seconds it was answered by a pleasant looking woman, followed by an excellent smell of cooking.

I introduced myself and found that I was speaking to Mrs. Fairlie. She took me up and showed me a pleasant attic with a distant view of the moor, and I agreed that it seemed suitable and could we discuss terms? Downstairs in the kitchen we talked over a cup of tea and a plate of home-made cakes fresh from the oven and the matter was fixed, so I could move in the following day. As she was showing me out along the hall I heard a whimper from a room leading off it and the soothing tones of Meg's voice.

"It's my little daughter," said Mrs. Fairlie. "She isn't very well, but Meg's with her, so no doubt she'll get well soon."

"If there's sickness in the house perhaps you mightn't wish to trouble—" I began.

"No, it'll be no bother having a boarder. Would you care to see Jeannie?" It was really a test, I thought, so I answered that I would if it wouldn't upset the little patient, and Mrs. Fairlie looked relieved and showed me into the room, being pleased to have a sympathetic boarder.

I nodded civilly to Meg and looked at the little girl. Instantly I knew I had come to the right place. In the centre of her forehead, in the place behind which the ancients said was the third eye, was a red patch. I touched it, and found it fever hot, compared with the coolness of the rest of the brow, and knew that it was an extraterrestrial disease called Cher.

Unless given certain treatment it was fatal, and an excellent way to begin taking over a planet. Quietly I took my leave explaining about my interview and went out into the street cursing mentally. If ever I needed a weapon I needed one then.

I walked through the town busy with late afternoon traffic and pictured it still, with corpses littering the street, and perhaps the scream of ambulance sirens in the distance. Fortunately Cher was not infectious, being caused by selective vibrations from a small resonator that could be made so as to go into a pocket, and no doubt, whatever evil minds had come to Earth, Jeannie was just an experiment, and soon a kindly man would come to the door with a bottle of a new antibiotic.

I went for the nearest phone and rang up Mrs. Fairlie's house. I told her that I would be back that evening, and on no account to give any medicine to Jeannie that might be brought to her door by a stranger. Somewhat mystified, she agreed, but said she never bothered with patent medicines anyway, so I hung up and went on my way. Lack of a standard weapon was a nuisance, but I felt certain there were other ways if I could think of them.

I found the distillery in the throes of a major reconstruction. Though spirit was still being produced it seemed likely that that side would soon be shut down. A new office and laboratory block were going up but in the meantime the old buildings were still being used. A secretary showed me in to the managing director's office.

" I like to interview executive personnel myself," he said heartily. " Glad to meet you, Mr. Tolland."

" I don't think you will be," I answered, speaking in Galing, " I'm a watcher." His face turned a sickly yellow. " Of course, I shall want to know how many of you there are, " I went on.

" There are six of us," he whispered. " If you do not object to it we will die together."

" Unfortunately I am not able to oblige you in that way," I said. " I am temporarily without a weapon."

" Therefore you cannot harm us ?" he asked.

" No, I can't, but I'm warning you, get out and leave this planet alone."

" Why should we ? Do you think the Centre will care what becomes of a little rim world ?"

" If the Centre appoints a watcher then the Centre knows."

" Then I, Kostar Grokil, say to you that I go on until the Centre comes for me and my friends, Yes, there are six of us now, but as Cher sweeps the world, more will come, and with the populace our slaves by virtue of the effects of the Gofal antidote to it, why then it will need a cleansing expedition. My friend, we are sitting pretty, a watcher without a weapon is no trouble to us."

" As long as you think so," I said. At that moment there was a knock on the door, he called " Come in " and the secretary entered with two cups of tea on a tray.

" Bless you, Liza," he said genially. "I've talked myself dry persuading Mr. Tolland to join our staff. But you will be with us won't you, Mr. Tolland."

" You've given me reason enough for staying," I said, " I'll take your offer of a position."

" Make a note of this then, Liza," he told the secretary, " and get Mr. Lingarth to prepare the documents for Mr. Tolland to sign tomorrow. You'll start a week to-day, Mr. Tolland, your position will be in charge of the Gofal unit." He glanced at his watch. " Five o'clock already. You can go, Liza," he said. " We'll see you tomorrow, Mr. Tolland. I feel certain you'll enjoy your work." I answered conventionally and took my leave. The idea of making something that would help the outworlders take over Earth turned my stomach, but my duty as a watcher was—watching—closely.

I was not really surprised when I saw Meg chatting with the gatekeeper at the distillery entrance.

" Hallo," she said to me. " I heard you were here, so I thought I'd wait and see if you were fixed up."

" Work ?" I asked.

" Yes."

" I've the post of manager of the Gofal unit."

" It sounds exciting," she said as we walked into the town.

" It is. Gofal is the antidote to Cher. Cher is a disease of the psyche, or soul, or ego, call it what you will. Initiated by a special resonator, and the symptoms of the disease are—"

" Inflammation of the third eye ?"

" You learn fast, tell me more, Meg ?"

" Well you phoned Mrs. Fairlie to refuse strangers with bottles of antibiotics for Jeannie, so we did, and I presume that Gofal does something deadly to anyone who takes it."

" It does. It never leaves the body and settles in the nervous system. A person infected with Gofal can be controlled like a robot. But people being what they are would probably prefer being controlled rather than dying of Cher."

" I never believe in a cure being worse than the disease," she said. " I've been to my friend Dr. Fergus Mowbray, and this evening he will visit Jeannie and go to work with his pills if she is no better. She will be well before he comes because I've second-sight enough to know that there is a safe cure for Cher, and you can do it."

" Why should I ?"

" For the same reason that I took a stranger in on a stormy night, because you're good enough not to stand by and watch a child die when she could be saved. You can walk on to the *North Star* from here, or you can turn the corner with me to Mrs. Fairlie's."

" There's always something around the corner," I answered.

In Jeannie's bedroom Meg took off her coat.

" Get professional," she told me, " I can follow."

" Life force," I said, " emanates from the prefrontal lobes of the brain in certain cells which are not detectable by present-day apparatus. Highly psychic people are supposed to see this force as an aura, perhaps they can. However these cells are duplicated as are all parts of the brain, and just as the left side of the brain controls the right side of the body, so the spare cells produce a life force diametrically opposite to that emited by the proper cells. Cher is caused by the dormant cells being awakened by a resonator unit. Only a small charge, given out as a beam, is needed.

" As more and more of the usually quiescent cells come into action, so the life force from the proper source is damped down, and eventually it is cancelled entirely and the patient dies. Gofal paralyses all the duplicate cells in the brain and nervous system, so that the operating cells are unhampered, but when anyone with a nervous system so treated needs moral strength to resist control, then the extra life force that can normally be called on isn't available.

" The proper cure for Cher is destruction of the artificially stimulated life cells. This does not harm the patient, and the dead cells are replaced as all cells are when they complete their

service to the organism. The rogue life force has to be polarised long enough for the cells that give it out to die, just as the brain cells normally die if air or blood is cut off to them. One of us must believe that Jeannie will live, that is one polarising unit, the other must believe that she will die, and that will complete the cancelling."

"Won't the proper brain cells be damaged?" asked Meg.

"Yes, if it is kept up too long. There are evidences of people being wished to death in that way. The moment that the red blotch disappears you must instantly change your thoughts. Since you believe that Jeannie will get well you can think positively. I will think negatively. It will probably help if we each take one of Jeannie's hands."

I took one little hand between mine, and when she had locked the bedroom door, Meg drew up a chair and took hold of the other. I looked at her and nodded. Then I focussed my thoughts on Jeannie lying so still.

Almost I could feel the presence of the courteous gentleman in black, as a twentieth century writer Walter de La Mare had called Death. Or Miil, as some worlds in the Galaxy named the passing; Miil the Weaver, spinning a dark net to ensnare the soul. And if this child died what of it? A speck on the surface of a grubby little planet, orbiting an insignificant sun almost into the great cold of the void between the galaxies. If the whole of Earth vanished it would never be noticed. What was it to me if all the human race was destroyed by Cher or subjugated by Gofal?

Deeper and deeper my mind plunged into a hideous pool of the necessity that Jeannie should die, and then dimly I saw a red mark fading. Fiercely I jammed on mental brakes, dragging my train of thought to a halt I fought my way back to normality and once more I was seated in a bedroom, looking down at an exhausted patient, sleeping normally, with a forehead clear of any marking.

"That was well done, George Tolland," said Meg gravely.

"She's cured," I answered, "and she'll be immune to Cher for the rest of her life." Meg went and opened the bedroom door, just as Mrs. Fairlie was coming from the kitchen to answer the front door bell. I heard voices and presently Meg came into the room followed by a smiling man.

" This is Dr. Fergus Mowbray," she said. " Dr. Mowbray meet George Tolland." We shook hands and he looked at Jeannie.

" Glad I wasn't needed," he said. " Well, I'll get along."

" Just a minute," I said. " There may be more cases like this."

" It's my duty to fight disease," he answered.

" Medical science on this planet is not advanced enough to overcome Cher."

" Meg," he asked, " do I—"

" Ask for Mr. Tolland to be put away ? No, I wish it was as simple as that. We'll be round later tonight to discuss it."

By that time dinner was cooked and Mrs Fairlie and her husband insisted that we dine with them. By tacit consent none of us discussed Jeannie, instead we talked about the repair of hovercars and I got on to my travels, and the difficulty of negotiating mountain areas where the air was thin. Whereupon the subject of blast superchargers was brought up and I agreed to have one fitted. But at last Meg and I left, and went for a walk round Moraig.

Already the streets were lit up by the glow of lumafloods and people were on their way seeking amusement of different kinds, cinetrid or the more popular bingobowl, where the bowlers had to get their shots through traps at the end of the alley to match the number sequence on their cards. But Meg and I found a bridge over a gurgling stream and sat on the broad parapet and talked.

" I've been thinking about placebos," she said.

" Well ?"

" There was a time when the only medicines were placebos. Oh, there was the odd case where a genuine specific against a certain disease was found by accident, but in the main it was held that a placebo of one sort or another was adequate."

" So ?"

" Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. There are old records in the town archives which I suggest you read. The part I like concerns the accusations against one Katherine Fraser of causing a plague. I'd hazard a guess that she was an ancestor of mine. The principal accuser was one John McAuld a brewer and he claimed that he had observed her performing divers unchristian practices, and on occasion to be

in the company of a dark man, strange to the town. I am happy to say that she filled the court with curses and blasphemies shocking to hear, and was duly sentenced to be burnt at the stake. She died completely unrepentant and vowed that one day the brewer would regret his action. Anyway the plague ceased thereafter, as nice an issue of a placebo as you could wish to find. Now it seems to me that it is time for the issue of another placebo, but this time with the brewer as the scapegoat."

" A limited company is rather different to a lone woman."

" Not if some suitable unchristian practices are observed."

" Meaning that I have to do some sabotage from within and create a scare."

" Roughly. I remember reading of the scares some time ago in the early days of fission power when there was an accident. If I recall correctly there was one in England, at Windscale wasn't it ? It ought to be easy for you to arrange something. How does the poem go ? ' Hide, hide, witch, the good folk come to burn thee. Their keen enjoyment hidden by the gothic mask of duty.' Yes, my ancestress should sleep easily wherever she is, to see her accuser being hounded by the same fickle foolish people."

" Hasn't the World Government tamed them ?" I asked.

" Why not take me for a drink in the *North Star* and see ?"

" Yes, why not indeed ? The manager asked me not to mention your name under his roof, but he said nothing about not taking you there."

Chapter Three

The lounge of the *North Star* could be entered from the street without passing through the hotel entrance, so Meg and I went in and took seats at a table by the fire, a concession to tradition, for the lounge was well warmed by the radiunits built into the lighting. I touched a contact plate and a waiter appeared. I watched his expression change from inscrutability as he saw Meg.

" Two whiskies," I said.

" I can serve you, sir," he answered, " but I regret that I am forbidden to serve the lady."

" For what reason ?" I asked. An answer was interrupted when the doors of the lounge leading in from the hotel swung open and a group of men, headed by Kostar Grokil came in.

" Well Tolland," he boomed, " glad to see you, and your charming companion. I'm told you're staying here. I take it that the lady is local ?"

" Correct," I replied. " This is Miss Margaret Fraser. Margaret, meet my employer Mr. Grokil and his friends. They intend to conquer the world with Gofal."

" What a splendid idea," purred Meg, " and no doubt you will then regulate affairs so that I can be served in this hotel."

" You can't be served ?" asked Grokil.

" No. You know how tradition-bound these people are, they say I'm not a nice person. But perhaps you agree with them ?" It was just about as seductive a come-on as I had ever heard, and I wondered what mad scheme Meg was undertaking. It had the desired effect. The manager was summoned, given a good talking to and with a bad grace he ordered that Meg be served. Whisky of great age and potency was then brought out and we sat down to make a night of it. The last thing I remembered was Kostar Grokil swearing to attend the next witches' Sabbath, and Meg explaining the art of drawing pentacles to him.

I woke to a grey dawn, feeling far worse than any watcher had a right to feel. I realised that by some means I had come to the bothy and was lying on the settle, Meg was industriously stirring the cauldron of porage.

" Good morning," I groaned, " how did I get here ?"

" Fergus brought us in his car. That was after we called on him and had a long conference about the next steps to take against Grokil and his friends."

" I don't believe it. I was in no state for long conferences. Did I make much of a fool of myself at the *North Star* ?"

" To the contrary. You were the most sober of any of us. You were a brilliant raconteur, a genial personality, and in point of fact you made the evening. There was some trouble after the others had gone drunken to bed. The manager suggested that you had better leave the hotel at once because you were destroying its reputation by associating with me."

" And then ?"

" We picked up your things and went to Fergus' place. By the time we had things settled it was much too late to go and wake up the Fairlie family, so Fergus drove us here as, I said."

" And the pair of you decanted me on to the settle."

" I keep telling you, George, you were rock cold sober, a watcher cannot get drunk."

" I don't feel like a watcher now," I mumbled, sitting up and clutching at my throbbing head. Meg smiled, and poured something out of a jug into a beaker and gave it to me. I drank it, and found it bitter and astringent, but I felt rather better thereafter.

" Cold nettle tea," she said, " a placebo for the morning after. Now would you like some breakfast ?"

We ate in silence, then when we were finished Meg said, " Tell me what Ak'hanjl means ?"

I shook my head. " Search me," I confessed.

" You would have known yesterday," she said. " But I won't keep you in suspense. It's Galing for Sector Watcher. An ordinary watcher is just called hanjl. Odd isn't it, we have the words Archangel and Angel."

" Heavenly messengers, " I said absently. Then I leapt up, sending shooting waves of pain through my head. " I should have known Galing," I exclaimed. " What have you done ?"

" Easy, George," she said, gently pushing me back in my seat. " I played a witch's trick on you last night. When your true self was unconscious through too much whisky, Fergus and I got in contact with the true watcher."

" The true watcher ?"

" Yes. You didn't think you were the actual form of the watcher, did you ?"

" Yes, why not ? Kostar Grokil and his friends are from space and are humanoid."

" Primitives," she said almost contemptuously, " from undeveloped rim systems. They're a few years ahead of us. We still have to go outside our system, they have interstellar travel and some gadgets so that they were undetectable when they approached Earth. But at the Centre, George, where there are races perhaps a million years ahead of us, there the physical body has long since been discarded. Intelligences there are pure energy, and they make it their concern to see that the galaxy is looked after and not allowed to destroy itself through little bickerings and troubles. You're human, George, human right through only you were—"

" Possessed ?" I asked bitterly.

" You're a fool, George. What makes you imagine that a life form as far advanced as the watcher would take over your body without your permission. No, it went into symbiosis with you and it paid you. How do you think you got all those

wonderful qualifications? Could a normal human have run three courses of study at once and passed them all? No, of course not. The true watcher needed a life-form highly qualified by Earth standards so that almost any door was open to it. In the course of its duty you were taken through the world, seeing all sorts of wonderful places, and doing all sorts of wonderful things. It saw that you lacked for nothing. I ask you, what more could anyone want?"

"All right," I admitted. "I've done the watcher an injustice. You said you were in actual contact with it, what did you want?"

"I wanted its help," she answered simply. "I knew the evil that Kostar Grokil and his people planned to do. It was the watcher's duty to destroy them, as a doctor destroys a cancer. But when the doctor is waiting for an instrument then at least he must try to stop the cancer spreading. Then, speaking through you, it asked why I sought help to save people who had used my ancestors so cruelly, who were always bickering, who could not settle the smallest difference without bloodshed. It suggested that perhaps it would be for the best if Earth was sterilised and a new start made. I knew I was being tested, George, but in the corner into which it had driven me I found inspiration. I said that a race such as Man, who had crucified itself so often and so cruelly and yet survived, must have seeds of greatness to have lasted so long. It was silent for what seemed like hours and then it simply asked what I planned to do."

"You had a plan ready made," I said.

"Yes. To turn the people against Grokil and his associates as I told you. I had thought about it, and I knew you were right about people being tamed, but if the watcher could move from one to another then it could rapidly whip up a mob. I put the moral aspect of it being wrong to take control of anyone's mind against the evil that would be let loose if it didn't, and the watcher agreed to do this part of our plan."

"But what will you achieve by all this?" I asked. "I'm certain that you'll succeed in getting up a mob, but won't the outworlders just move on elsewhere?"

"Probably, but at least it's a positive action, and better than just waiting patiently for a weapon to turn up, by which time they'd have a good chance to be in control of Earth. There is another thing, George, you didn't tell me that the weapon was also a symbiote."

" Yes," I said, " she got married. They were very happy, the weapon was smashed by the emotional charges released."

" She didn't like you but kept you company ? It doesn't sound as if a woman would do that."

" Well, that's how it happened."

" No doubt that's how it looked to you. Did you not try to hold her ?"

" Should I have ?"

" George, I think you're naive. How do you know that your weapon didn't like you ? It could have been something wonderful, a weapon and a watcher with their symbiotes in complete harmony."

" No, for the reason that I gave you, emotional charges—"

" It's rubbish," she said fiercely. " Do you think that a being, a God almost, would be bothered by our trivial little temperaments ? I don't know what happened but I can guess. Your symbiote was so reluctant to control you that it preferred to lose its weapon rather than drive you to do something it wasn't sure you wished to do."

"That may be quite right," I soothed her, " and we've talked a lot about me. Supposing we change the subject and get on to your past. You're much too well educated to have spent all your life on this moor. How about filling in some background?"

" There isn't really much to fill in. My father was Head of the Faculty of Languages at the regional University. He was completely in sympathy with the Gaelic Culture and on one of his field trips he met my mother who came from Moraig. She had been brought up in the old traditions, she even spoke Gaelic as her everyday language. When they weren't in residence at the university they lived here. I never saw two people as happy as they were. I went to the University and took an honours degree in psychology and went on research for my doctorate. I was awarded it, and when I came home it was to learn that both my parents had been killed in a hovercar crash. There was enough money so that I could stay on here, and my mother had taught me all her knowledge about naturopathy. Thus I make a little extra by doctoring the minor ailments, with Fergus to help out with anything complicated."

" You like him ?"

" Oh, yes, he was a great family friend even as a medical student. His girl is just finishing a course in medicine at the university. When she's completed it they're going to get married and she'll share his practice, which is a nice thing."

" And you'll go on as a lonely witch."

" For an ex-watcher you take liberties," she scolded me.

" By the way," I said, " where is the watcher anyway, and will it come back ?"

" Oh yes, as long as you're agreeable. At the moment it's in Moraig, getting the temper of the people. How do you feel without it ?"

" Not too bad. There are one or two gaps in my memory, such as the lack of Galing, but I'm not crippled by any means. But, of course, without the watcher I'll no longer be immune to any nasty thing that the outworlders may do to me. Still I don't think they can tell whether I have the watcher or not." I stood up. " I'll have to get along back to the town," I said. " I think that I could do a lot of useful propaganda spreading, about the dangers of the work I'll be doing, and you might do the same. By the way, where's Andrew ?"

" Out on the moor shepherding," she answered shortly, so I didn't press the point.

Chapter Four

I was able to get a lift into Moraig and when I arrived I went straight to Mrs. Fairlie's house and found that Dr. Mowbray had left my luggage. In the quiet of my room I examined it, particularly one case that seemed to have no locks on it, and weighed heavily. It opened at my touch however and I looked at a rather incomprehensible collection of apparatuses, and quite suddenly the brief gaps in my memory became important. I wanted the watcher back, on any terms if there was no other way, but as a friend and adviser if it could be done.

I sat perfectly still waiting, and in a few minutes I was aware of a sort of question and answer going on inside of me. It was more in terms of feeling than in actual words, and the whole point of it was whether I was to be in charge of the watcher and its powers. To my surprise I was arguing almost violently that I was not fit to be trusted, but my gentle opponent made the point that only by taking a trust could I learn to bear it with honour, and so at last I accepted and a wave of causeless joy seemed to sweep through me, and I had a dim and distant impression of symbiote after symbiote, none of whom had been fit to have the control of the watcher, until I, George Tolland, had at last made the grade, and was able to give the watcher the reward it had sought for so long, the humility of service.

I looked at the case and its contents again, and it all made sense. There was the device that supplied money of any sort as it was required, although by its use I had accumulated a comfortable enough bank account upon which I could draw as I needed. There was a manipulator, that worked on atomic cohesive forces to cut or shape. Other things of more esoteric uses were also available, but there was nothing that could conceivably be used as a direct weapon. I shut the case again and went downstairs for lunch.

Jeannie had been allowed up to eat it but after she had gone back to bed I had words with her mother on the subject of education and the payment therefore. Officially, education in the World State was free, but that didn't extend to the extras that were almost necessities. The Fairlies were, of course, a proud family but even by scraping there would hardly be enough to justify Jeannie's cleverness financially. The best I could do was to get them to accept a long-term loan as and when it would be required.

I went out into the town rather pleased with a voluntary act of assistance being done without the watcher's prompting. I called at Dr. Mowbray's surgery, officially to register for medical help should I need it personally, but in fact to acquaint him with the strategy to be employed against the outworlders.

During the rest of that week I went about Moraig just being my normal self, and getting to know people. As senior staff at the distillery I could always get an audience of interested listeners. The general feeling of the town was that it was a good thing that the distillery had been saved. Unfortunately, as the oldsters said, chemical investigation had been able to duplicate the exact constitution of the finest aged whisky, and the craftsmanship in its blending and maturing was no longer required, so the smaller distilleries had gone to the wall. Lean times had been in store for some of Moraig's people, but with an expanding trade in biochemicals there was every prospect of a revival in wage packets.

I agreed with the prophets, but said that working with biotics had its own risks and mentioned one or two cases during the times when nations were concentrating on germ warfare, before world unity had abolished such horrors. Nevertheless I always managed to leave a reassurance apparently, but deep down fears beneath. The Sunday of that week I spent out at the bothy in Meg's company, with outworlders,

watchers and the rest being relegated to unimportance. I was not surprised to find that I liked her very much.

I checked in at my department on the Monday morning and found a sealed envelope on my desk containing the process sheet for the making of Gofal. Having studied it I went down to look at the apparatus we would be using. The main vessel was a very old-fashioned induction kettle, of which I immediately expressed disapproval in Kostar Grokil's office.

" Now look, Tolland," he said, " that kettle's perfectly safe. True there are new ones on order but they won't be here for six or seven weeks. We want five tons of Gofal and we want it now. You're merely trying to delay us in vain hope that your weapon will arrive before we commence operations."

" You may believe that," I answered, " but it isn't true. However I've officially said that the kettle's dangerous and there my responsibility for any after effects ends."

So I went back to the shop outwardly showing high dudgeon, but inwardly pleased that the outworlders were reacting as I hoped. However, I gave orders for firefighting equipment to be ready and under the pretext of examining the kettle I used the manipulator to weaken it considerably.

At last all the material was in and we started taking it up to reaction temperature. Then, without any warning, liquid started oozing out of the sides of the kettle and all at once it flashed into flame. We went to work efficiently, but the materials gave off a lot of corrosive fumes which meant working in masks which hampered us. A pall of black smoke drifted towards the town, and when everything was at last under control we went and stood outside until the precipitron units had made the shop habitable without protection.

I was aware of the sudden gapping in my memory which meant that the watcher had gone and then I happened to look at the street beyond the factory gates, two or three elderly people and some youngsters had apparently collapsed. I instructed the gateman to call ambulances, and as they came up and their sirens died I heard the distant sound of other ambulances on their work. I saw Kostar Grokil and his friends coming out of the office building on the run.

" What's happened, Tolland ?" he demanded. " We've had a call from the hospital, Elderly people and children are collapsing all over town."

" Well," I said, " I warned you that the kettle was unsafe, it must be something in the smoke from the fire that's doing it. However your kettle's out of action now and needs extensive repairs. I would recommend that someone goes to the hospital and sees what's up, and since I was in charge of the unit, it seems that I am the logical choice. I would also get on to your legal experts, because there are bound to be claims for damages."

" All right," he said.

I made my way through a curiously quiet town, mainly populated by anxious groups of people talking together on the streets. I knew what had happened to the aged and the young who had collapsed. The watcher had merely acted on the propensity of those age-groups for readily sleeping. A mild stimulation of the centre controlling sleep in the brain and they collapsed. The fact that they were all sent to the hospital made the watcher's task of keeping them asleep even easier.

I made for Dr. Mowbray's surgery, but as I rather expected I was told that he had gone to the hospital to cope with the heavy influx of patients, so I made my way there, and as a representative from the distillery I was at once taken up to the Director's office.

I told the story straight, there was no need to lie or add anything. When he asked what was in the kettle I answered that its contents were confidentially covered and that without permission I couldn't disclose their nature. I added that my firm would do everything in its power to recompense those afflicted. I then took my leave and found Dr. Mowbray checking the physical condition of the new arrivals more or less for something to do rather than in any hopes of effecting a cure.

I took him into a corner and explained what was wrong with the patients and he relaxed visibly. But then an agitated nurse came up and said that a crowd of relatives and friends of the afflicted had assembled outside of the hospital and were in an ugly mood. I offered to go out and speak to them.

The watcher had done its work well, and the ringleaders seemed to be a group of labourers.

" Now look," I addressed them. " I assure you that the owners of the distillery are extremely sorry that this unfortunate thing has happened. We believe that your relatives will recover in due course and that there is nothing to worry about. Be certain that we shall take more precautions the next time we make this particular material."

" Gods," roared a labourer, " ye tell us ye're gaein' tae make yon foul stuff again. Hae ye nae wits aboot ye? I've twa bairns lying sick in there, whut's tae say that ye don't harm them again?"

" There's a damn fine way tae mak sure, Jock," called one of his friends. " Tear yon place doon. It doesna mak wnusky any mair." There was a roar of agreement from the crowd.

" You can't take the law into your own hands," I protested. " The company will pay, and pay well—"

" Shut ye'r dirty Sassenach mooth," shouted the ringleader, " and dinna try and stop us, we'll leave ane a brick standin' of yon place."

I hurried to the hospital phone booth and dialled the distillery, asking for Kostar Grokil.

" There's a mob heading your way," I said, " if I were you I'd get out fast. Don't think you can stop it, it's watcher controlled."

" This round to you, Tolland," he said. " We'll find another place don't worry," and he hung up. I borrowed Dr. Mowbray's car and drove out to the road out of Moraig that headed for the Moor. I had wrecked my own car scouting about the moor for the place where the outworlders had hidden their ship, but I knew they would lead me to it. I parked in a side road and suddenly I felt the watcher was back and instantly I knew what had happened.

Kostar Grokil and his friends had been making their getaway when the mob arrived. They had cut a line of escape with heat-beam projectors killing several people, and the World Law Authority had been informed and were after them. I heard the scream of a high-powered hovercar and as it flashed past the side-road entrance I swung my own car out after it. Dr. Mowbray's car was quite fast as well and I was able to keep up with them as they headed for a high part of the area.

Presently they stopped and I pulled my own car up as they jumped out and began running up a hillside. I pounded after them, one of them pulled out a weapon and sent a lancing beam of fire at me, which hit me and splashed harmlessly. I gained on them and then Kostar Grokil drew another weapon and fired at me. At once I was helplessly encased in a glutinous mass of material that rapidly hardened into as effective a set of bonds as anyone could want. I flopped helplessly on the ground.

" So even the watcher can be stopped," said a familiar voice and Meg came up.

" Get me out of here," I said. " It'll cut with a knife."

" That I will," she agreed and drew a wicked-looking dirk. With several slashes I was free. I told her what had happened. " Is there no limit to their wickedness," she asked. Then we both paused as we heard a high-pitched humming and slowly a conical shape rose from behind a hill.

" There they go," I said, " at least we've scared them."

" No," she whispered almost to herself, " they won't escape, they won't. Damn you " she screamed, " damn you back to the filthy hell from which you came." She lapsed into strange syllables of Gaelic, and somehow the air seemed charged with power. A strange wild woman screaming almost forgotten curses, and an alien shape that rose slowly— and lurched, then toppled and disappeared in a great flare of energy that momentarily dazzled me.

" Meg," I said unsteadily, putting my arm round her shoulder as she stood panting. " Meg, you're a weapon."

" But I hated them so," she said, and sat down on a rock.

" A watcher must have a weapon," I remarked. " Will you come with me, Meg. Forget all this, think of all we could do together."

" No," she said and looked at me, and I had never seen two eyes so full of misery. " I would like to come, George, but I have obligations. You had better go."

" I will not," I said firmly

" Go," she screamed, " Get hence, leave me alone " But I put a hand on each of her shoulders and looked her full in the face

" Poor Margaret," I said softly. " When you were talking with the watcher, and asking for all those things for other people, you never asked for anything for yourself. No easy sleep at nights, no freedom from worry, no riddance of that great ugly figure casting a shadow on your life. Tell me, Meg, tell me of Andrew."

" Does it matter ?" she asked dully. " You may as well know however, that you may understand why I can never bear you company. When I was clearing up the bothy after my parents' death I once went to a dance in Moraig. Andrew was there and he saw me and that night he was drunk and came after me. I don't know why I opened the door to him but I did,

and I saw the look in his eyes and knew what he intended. I had to save myself, so I offered him a drugged drink, he took it and was unconscious. But that didn't satisfy me, I wanted to implant a hypnotic compulsion in him so that he would never touch me again.

" I had a suitable drug in my case that given as a prefrontal injection would render him particularly amenable to hypnotic treatment. I filled a hypodermic and inserted it into his prefrontals through the eye corner, and my hand shook. When I withdrew the needle I knew that the damage was done. He was nothing more than a living vegetable. He is responsive to commands but incapable of thinking for himself. Now you see why I can never leave him."

" He could be institutionalised."

" No, my conscience would never allow it."

" So you lived here," I said almost to myself. " You became a witch and suffered stigma and hatred out of a sense of duty. But I think I can help you, the watcher probably has talent enough to do what is necessary. It is written ' Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live ' but I could add ' as a witch.' Where is Andrew ?"

Meg called out and presently he shambled up the hill towards us.

" I had him searching the moor for the ship," she said, " he found it, that was why I was here." I placed a hand on each side of the great unkempt head and looked into the vacant eyes.

" Now," I whispered, " now." Slowly intelligence dawned in them and the slack mouth tightened.

" Whit, whit are ye doin' man ?" he mumbled.

" Nothing," I said. " You were lost but we found you again." Looking at Meg I thought how radiant she was. " Coming," I said to her.

" Of course," she answered, " what's a watcher without his weapon ?" Over the moor sounded the distant sirens of police hovercars, and I picked out their bright Law Authority colours against the purple background.

" What shall we say ?" asked Meg as we walked hand in hand down to the road.

" I don't know what we'll say," I told her, " but I know what we'll do. We'll make up a placebo for them."

Alan Burns

The youngest generation had been born into the hostile environment of the alien planet, descendants of the survivors of a crashed spaceship. To them the thought of eventual rescue was insignificant when compared with the struggle for existence which faced them every day.

THE FOURTH GENERATION

by JOSEPH GREEN

Grant Johns turned at my hail and waited by the mouth of the gorge. There was an angry, impatient look on his handsome face. "What in hell do you want, Shrimp?"

I felt my already feeble courage crumbling away and inwardly I quaked, but my voice was firm when I said, "I'm going with you."

"Andy, this is going to be rough enough as it is. I won't have time to look after you, too."

"I'll take care of myself, thanks, Grant. Look, I'm going, and it'll be easier on both of us to work together instead of quarrelling. We don't stand a very good chance as it is."

The big blond youth with the relaxed attitude and the bulging muscles looked down at me with almost visible contempt in his eyes.

We were barely on speaking terms at the best of times, though we had of necessity been friends of a sort as boys. The advent of the Redhead reaching mating age had ended

that phase in a hurry. Big, handsome, husky Grant Johns seemed a natural choice for her, and most of the colony thought I was wasting my time trying to compete with him, but as yet she had not chosen him and settled the matter.

Grant was one of the most promising young men in the colony, but I was doing as well in my chosen field as he in his. Grant was in the hunting corps and had already made the rank of Hunter, a feat equalled by few of his age. I had gone the other way, taking on the dullest and most prosaic job in the community, that of junior Keeper of Records. In my spare time I helped the two selected women teach school, the same school out of which I had recently graduated at the top of the class in scholastics and the bottom in useful skills. However, Old Weariden, the Keeper of Records, was getting so feeble and uncertain in his actions there was talk among the people of compelling him to retire and live with his children. When this happened I, Andy Carter, would become Keeper, a job which entitled me to a seat on the Board of Governors, the ruling body of the colony.

"I can be of more help than perhaps you realize," I went on persuasively. I'm small, and not in Grant's class when it came to a fight. "Do you remember, two seasons back, when we captured two of the Uglies alive and kept them in the brig for a while. Weariden and I haven't spread it around very much, but we got a fairly good working knowledge of their language before they went on that hunger strike and starved themselves to death."

Grant was silent for a moment. Then a sly grin touched his lips. "You wouldn't make one good bite for an Ugly, Andy. Why put yourself in their jaws? Afraid it will make too good an impression if I rescue her alone?"

"Don't talk nonsense!" I said angrily. "You know darn well the odds are a hundred to one against our getting her out and getting back alive. Captain Jamie told me you tried to organize a rescue party and no one would come. I heard the whole story when I came in from the fields at noon and I hurried out here to catch you. What more do you want?"

"Nothing," soothed Grant. "Nothing at all.... Except that she's going to marry me when we get back, or my name isn't Grant Johns."

"Maybe. *If* we get back," I said grimly. "And now if you agree for us to work together, let's get going. The Uglies are far enough ahead of us as it is."

For an answer Grant turned and moved off down the gorge at an easy lope, the pack on his back swinging slightly with his movements, his hand always near his belt and the long knives hanging there. The survivors of the shipwreck had named this harsh and inhospitable world Chaos, and here a man's weapons were always best close to hand.

"Have you learned to shoot that bow yet, Shrimp?" asked Grant as we jogged steadily along. "You were the lousiest shot in the entire class under Hunter Armstrong."

"I'm not as good as you, but I can hit an Ugly at a hundred paces," I answered quickly, concentrating on my running and breathing. I didn't bother to add that I had been practising since my graduation two winters back, although a bow was not one of my required tools. I could practise all my life and not be as good as Grant, to whom physical skills came naturally.

"Grant, how did it happen that Redhead got caught?" I asked a moment later, as I got used to the steady trot and my breathing eased.

"The Uglies sent a few scouts ahead this time," said Grant easily, talking without apparent effort. "The watchman at the South Pass wasn't on his toes, and they got him before he could sound the alarm. The Redhead and a couple of friends were picking berries near the trail just this side of the watchman's tree. The friends got away. She didn't."

There was silence for a few moments as we concentrated on our running. We were almost through the North Pass now, and ahead of us the country looked nothing like the valley we were leaving. Shipwreck Harbour was a huge pocket in the surrounding mountains, a high-level grassy valley crossed by one springfed river. The Southern entrance was a narrow defile not over forty feet wide, with sheer rock faces rising to an imposing height on either side. Beyond the defile the country dipped sharply downward.

The land here was thickly wooded, mile after mile of timber growing tall and strong in the hot sunshine. The Northern entrance was somewhat wider and the walls were less sheer, though extremely rough and broken. The exit at this end of the valley opened on to a high, rocky plateau.

which in turn gave way to small, rocky hills, which levelled out at last to become an immense grassy plain. The survivors had been almost wiped out the first two times the Uglies came through. Only the steel walls of the ship had saved them. After the second attack they had realized the beasts came into the valley from the South at roughly the spring of the year, and returned from the North in the fall.

Obviously the Uglies were migratory animals, and the valley where the ship crashed happened to be the easiest way through the mountains from their winter to their summer quarters. During the second generation there had been an attempt to blockade the valley and compel the Uglies to hunt another path North, but the creatures had come in such numbers the defenders had finally exhausted their small ammunition supply and found themselves fighting the animals hand to hand. The humans were beaten back and had suffered a severe loss of lives.

After that it became the custom to post a watchman with a drum at each end of the valley, and when the drums sounded the people took refuge in the steel sides of the ship and watched the Uglies go trooping past. After a time the people grew until not enough food could be stored inside the ship, and a stockade had been erected around it. For the past two generations the people, twice a year, had spent a miserable week penned inside the stockade watching the Uglies file by. Occasionally the animals, acting together, attacked the stockade walls, and there was sharp and bitter fighting before they were driven off. They stole any food left outside the stockade, whether in a house or in the ground, and for sheer devilishness not infrequently tore down the houses and other small dwellings the people erected outside the stockade. Since the warning system was set up, however, only a few people, stragglers and those unlucky enough to be caught outside, had been captured.

The Uglies had a very simple and economical use for the men they caught. The ate them. Any woman unlucky enough to fall into their hands alive was carried triumphantly out of the valley, and precisely what happened to her no one knew for certain. There were stories, unconfirmed and not in the official records, that captive women were carried to their hunting grounds in the North and there used as victims in orgiastic ceremonies. These included the rape of the

woman by every adult male, and her eventual end over a cooking fire when she was taken away from the males by the enraged females of the clan. How those stories came into being, and how much truth there was in them, no one could say. However, it was noticed that when the wolves returned on their next trek six months later the woman was never with them.

Grant eased his pace and motioned me to silence as we emerged from the pass on to the high plateau. From the lip of the pass we could see completely across it. He surveyed the territory ahead carefully. The entire landscape was lifeless and barren, though there was abundant evidence on every side that we stood on a well-used trail.

Grant broke into a trot again as we reached the open land. From there to the end of the comparatively flat area he set a stiff pace, but again stopped and carefully reconnoitered the downslope, and the rising shoulder of the hill ahead, before starting the descent.

"How far ahead do you think they are?" I panted as we started down.

"Not too far. They came through early this morning, and that gives 'em about six hours start on us, but with the females and cubs along they always travel slow. I figure if we keep going after dark we might spot their campfire. After that it's up to us."

I hadn't thought of the campfires. The animals were too primitive to make fire, but they used it by never letting it go out. In every group which passed the stockade two individuals carried a live firepot of some sort. They partially cooked their meat, and the keepers of the fire were important personages among them. The fires, and the large rude bags they always carried on their trips North, were their only signs of semi-civilization.

"You have any plan in mind to get her away from them?" I asked Grant.

"No. Figured I'd worry about that when I found them," he answered shortly.

"Grant," I said a moment later, "if something happens —if we don't get back, I mean—I want you to know I think that was a darn good speech you made at assembly the other night. They booed you down, but you were right and a lot of us know it. It's time we turned off that distress signal and

accepted the fact we're going to be here. The only steps this colony has made so far are the ones they had to make in order to survive at all. If they'd turn their faces towards the future and start planning for it instead of acting as if they're leaving tomorrow we might get somewhere. Why would anyone want to go back to crowded, cramped Earth anyway? According to our records the first generation emigrated in search of elbow room, though they seem to have forgotten that."

"Try telling the old boys it's time to buckle down," snorted Grant. He had tried at the last meeting, and got a lot of support, but lost in the end because he asked for too much in one bundle. The people had lived for sixty years with the hope of discovery and rescue foremost in their minds, and could not change their way of thinking overnight. That was what was wrong with the colony. All projects were based on the premise that rescue was just around the corner and they would have to be abandoned anyway. The people lived a hand-to-mouth existence and let the future take care of itself. Only the lack of contraceptives, and the resulting high birthrate, had forced them into farming and hunting as much as they did.

Despite hardships the people had prospered, at least in numbers. Food was already in short supply and this year's crop was going to be inadequate. We had slaughtered the valley game so thoroughly the hunters now found it necessary to make forays through the two passes and hunt the great Northern plain, where abundant herds of hooved grazing animals lived, and the thick forests that coated the mountain slopes to the South. Just why it was necessary for the Uglies to leave their homes on the great plain each fall had never been quite clear, since, for eating purposes, the plain held more game than the entire Ugly population could consume in three lifetimes. There were quite a few mysteries about this world the colonists, despite sixty years impromptu residence, had not solved.

It was not, I reflected grimly, entirely their fault. The colonists, born on crowded, decadent Earth, had had little enough training in preparation for living on one of the already settled worlds. When the warper had failed on the first leg of their voyage and hurled them an unknown distance out of the known galaxy, melting into a useless

lump of slag as it did so, the would-be colonists had felt that the adventure was ruined from the start. When the crew had wrecked the ship attempting to land on the only planet within the limited range of the rockets their certainty of ruin had seemed confirmed. The jarring crash as the ship landed on its tail, and the smash-up when it tilted and fell full-length, had killed roughly half the hundred-and-sixty colonists and a third of the twenty-man crew.

According to the first Captain Jamie, still living but now retired from active work, the crash had resulted due to the exhaustion of the fuel supply as the ship was coming in. The suspense, I knew from old Weariden's account, had been almost unbearable when the ship's biologist had taken in a sample of the outside air and ran the tests that were to determine whether the survivors lived or joined their friends in oblivion. They had lived, though always with the desire to leave the hostile world that was their unwanted home, and Grant and I were of the third generation actually born on Chaos soil.

I brought my mind back to the present. Our steady, loping pace had carried us to the edge of the last hill. The last bright edge of the sun was disappearing as we topped the crest and Grant paused and looked long and far ahead. There was nothing to be seen but the open country of the great plain.

"We'll keep going and hope they camp close enough to the trail for us to spot their fires," said Grant decisively. There was no question of conference or consultation with me. Grant was a Hunter, a man of action, trained to know his way and feel at home in the wilderness. He had hunted on the plain several times, and was familiar with the land along the edge. I had seldom ventured outside the stockade gates, except to work the fields with the other men.

There was no pause for resting. It seemed that we ran for hours, until the shadows unobtrusively thickened into the black web of night, and still Grant did not slow the pace.

When I thought, at last, that I had about reached my limit, we saw the fires.

The great plain was level only on a comparative basis. Hillocks and small ridges, numerous gullies, many small streams and a few sizable rivers flowed across its green face. To protect their camp from plains-dwelling carnivores, some

of whom made the Uglies seem like tame pets, this band had retreated into a deep gully, now dry and dusty, and built a line of fires across the entrance. This gully was a deep slash in the side of a small hill, where a waterfall had once tumbled over the brow and dug a hole and escape channel out into the open plain.

The side of the hill was toward the trail, and we had passed by it before we saw the protective fires. Simultaneous with the sight of the flames a small wind blew softly over the plain toward us, and on it was the rank, animal smell of the Uglies.

We stopped and stared at the distant fires, breathing heavily. "Well, Shrimp, this is it," said Grant when he had recovered his breath.

I had to pant a moment longer. "What's your plan?" I finally asked.

"Let's get a little closer," said Grant. "The wind's in our favour."

Walking into the small breeze we approached the camp, coming at it from the entrance. When we were within a hundred yards we stopped and looked it over, lying flat in the high grass to one side of the trail. "We need to get behind them, on top of the bluff," Grant muttered. "Trouble is, they'll scent us if we move upwind."

"We can fix that," I answered, and wriggled my way back to the trail. I found what I wanted almost immediately and scooped up a double handful, returned to Grant and offered him half. "Rub yourself with that, all over your clothes. It should drown out our human scent."

"Whew! What in hell?" demanded Grant, holding the stinking mess away from his face.

"Their own excrement," I answered, rubbing the mess busily over my clothes. Grant hesitated, then saw the sense of my suggestion and followed suit. In a few minutes we smelled, to our own noses, like a pair of extremely unsavory Uglies.

"Let's go," said Grant when the job was done, and started off on his hands and knees, making a wide circle of the entrance fires. As soon as the shoulder of the small hill came between ourselves and the bright flames Grant rose to his feet and walked, as silent as a cat in the star-lighted darkness. I followed as quietly as I could manage.

With that instinctive sense of direction possessed by hunters and woodsmen Grant found his way around the hill to the precipice. When we cautiously extended our heads over the sharp lip of the watercourse we saw Redhead.

Directly under us the impact of the water had gouged a deep hole in the soft dirt. Some twenty feet deeper than the streambed in which the water had formerly run, it made a natural pit which formed an adequate prison. At the bottom of the pit was a small fire, and by it crouched the form of a woman.

I felt my breath catch in my throat as I looked at her. The genetic charts originated by the first generation limited the choice of any given member of the fourth generation to roughly eight possible mates. Started as a means of preventing inbreeding in the small community, the charts were now sacrosanct, the inviolable Law of the Land. The Redhead and seven other marriageable girls comprised the total selection of mates available to me. Unfortunately, she was also available to Grant.

Redhead was a beautiful young woman by anyone's standards. Tall, full-bodied, she was alive with the vigour of young blood, healthy and happy and unconcerned about her expected role of mother to part of the fifth generation. Her face was lightly freckled, a dark tan in colour, and she wore her distinctive hair long, letting it hang around her neck and shoulders in a russet cloud. Her breasts were full and high-held, her legs long and slim and delicately tanned. She had a mind as active and healthy as her body. If I could not have her I was not sure I wanted to marry at all.

I put my lips close to the big man's ear. "There are no guards posted! If we had a rope we could let it down from here and pull her up to us."

"If we had a rope," murmured Grant, and was silent. Below us, Redhead had risen to her feet and was walking around the limits of her prison, feeling the walls with her hands.

There were roughly fifty Uglies in this particular band, counting females and cubs, and their long-haired bodies, sprawling in disarray about the crackling fire, were an odd and gruesome sight in the flickering light. Bipeds, they stood taller than a man, and were heavier of frame. Their bodies, roughly man-like in shape, were covered with a thick coat of coarse hair, usually brown in colour, and their feet were

flat and possessed toes. There the similarity ended. The head of an Ugly strongly resembled that of an Earthly Wolf. Though they walked upright they did not possess hands. Their upper limbs ended in flat discs of skin-covered bone from which extended four sharp, curving non-retractile claws. They fought by sinking them deep into the flesh of an enemy's shoulders and drawing him into the ravenous teeth. Once an Ugly locked his claws in flesh only death could loosen them.

The creatures made no effort to form a real camp. They had a single large fire in the centre of the camp area, with their large woven bags scattered in disorder around it. A few of the males were still awake, gnawing on some bones left from the night's kills. The Uglies were omnivorous, as we knew from the fact that they ate our crops, but seemed to prefer meat when they could get it. As we lay watching, one of the beasts, whose hair was grey with age, rose and walked to the edge of the pit. The bone on which he was chewing still retained some scraps of meat. With a contemptuous movement he tossed it to the girl cowering by her small fire. It almost hit her. She started at the gnawed bone in revulsion, then kicked the loathsome thing to one side of the pit.

Above her, the two-legged beast growled an angry warning. The girl gave no sign she had heard. Stooping, the old Ugly scooped up a small rock in the semi-circle of his claws and clumsily dropped it in the pit. It hit the girl on the shoulder and she moaned a little with pain, but refused to look up.

Snorting and huffing, the beast stared at her as though minded to jump into the hole. Grant eased his bow off his shoulder and silently nocked an arrow. I placed a restraining hand on his arm and we waited, tense and ready. After a moment more the Ugly turned and walked back to the fire, where his companions had curled up to sleep. Still puffing and snorting, he shuffled around uncertainly for a moment, then opened one of the bags and drew out two large, round, hairy objects. Holding them clumsily in both paws he shambled back to the pit and tossed them at Redhead's feet. For the first time she looked up at her tormentor. There was hate and fury in her face, and an undying defiance. I felt a quick, strong surge of pride, in the girl herself

and the race that had produced her. Unfortunately, there were not many in the colony like her.

Grant put his lips close to my ear. "One of us must get to the edge of the pit," he muttered, keeping his voice above a whisper. A sibilant whisper would have carried far on the still air. "Our belts will make a long enough rope to draw her up. Take off yours and give them to me."

I quickly eased off my quiver and undid the strap that circled my shoulders. When I removed my belt and tied the ends of the two together I had a rope about six feet long. Grant was busy also. He wore a flashy double belt, one for his pants and another for the two hunting knives.

Grant's three belts and my two made a rope almost fifteen feet long. He carefully surveyed the lay of the land as he buckled them together. "Can you climb, Shrimp?"

"Fairly well," I muttered back.

Grant hesitated for a long moment. I knew he would have trusted himself far more than me in the camp, but at the same time it was essential that the man on the bluff be an excellent shot, and I was notoriously poor along that line, at least to the best of his knowledge.

"I'll have to go down and get her," I said.

"Yes," he agreed, bowing to the inevitable. "Let's give them a few minutes, though."

We settled back and waited for the Uglies to sink deeper into slumber. Like all animals, they slept lightly at best. I gazed into the red, firelit shadows, at the hairy beasts I had to go among, at the long claws that might soon rip into my cringing flesh, at the yellow teeth glinting slightly in the uncertain light, and I was afraid, deeply and darkly afraid . . .

I watched Redhead while we waited. She had picked up the two furry balls the old Ugly had thrown to her and was examining them with a critical eye. Laying one on the floor, she raised the other high and brought it smashing down on top of it. There was a sharp crack! as the one she held split in two. The sleeping beasts paid no attention to the sound. The Redhead raised one-half of the ugly object to her nose and I saw her sniff strongly, sniff again, then begin eating the strange meat in the shell. She had obviously had nothing to eat since her capture early that morning.

When we judged the beasts to be soundly asleep we eased along the precipice to a spot where climbing would be easier. I took one end of the strap in my hands and, my knife stuck in my pants, eased myself over the edge feet first. By the time Grant reached the end of the rope I had my feet on a small ledge. When I was secure I motioned to Grant and the big man dropped his end of the line.

I slowly gathered up the rope, coiled it about my neck and started the slow, agonizing descent. A guard was posted at the mouth of the gully, feeding the fires there, but he was far enough away to be less of a danger than the lightly slumbering beasts not fifty feet away.

Painful moments later I was crouching on the bottom of the gully, knife in hand, my eyes on the nearest Ugly sleeping not twenty feet away. The floor was sand and my bare feet made no sound as I crept toward the pit.

Easing my head over the edge, I stared downward at Redhead and almost cursed aloud. She was curled up in a ball by the fire, sound asleep.

I tied the rope to a shoulder of the rock on which I lay, eased myself over the edge and went down hand over hand, almost noiseless except for my breathing.

She stirred slightly as my feet hit the ground, but did not awaken.

She was lying with her face to the fire, and I approached her from the rear. I hesitated a moment, wondering how to awaken her without noise, then let safety be my guide and lay down behind her. I clamped one hand hard across her mouth, pulling her head back against my chest while encircling her arms and shoulders with my other arm. Before she could move I had thrown my legs around hers and held her in an immovable vise.

She woke up fighting, as instinctively as any wildcat, but after a few seconds the frenzy of her struggling eased and I could whisper into her ear, "Be quiet! It's me, Andy Carter!"

She was still for a moment, as if hardly daring to believe her ears. I felt her body trembling in my arms and loosened my grip. "All right now?"

She shakily nodded her head, and I uncovered her mouth. "How—where did—?" she breathed uncertainly.

"No time for questions now. We've got to get out of here." I rose and helped her to her feet. Weakly, she leaned against me.

I led her around the fire to the rope. "I'll pull you up," I whispered hoarsely, and immediately began climbing out. Just before emerging over the top I slowed my pace and cautiously raised my hand to look around. All was quiet.

I hastily untied the strap and, on my knees, got a good grip on the end. Below me, the girl clung tightly to the other end and, with me drawing the rope up hand over hand, placed her feet against the side of the wall and walked upwards to the edge.

I seized her hand and helped her over the lip. Hastily, I coiled the improvised rope about my shoulders again and leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "Grant is covering us from the top of the hill. Are you strong enough to climb that rock-face?"

The girl stared where I pointed, and weakly shook her head.

I hesitated a moment, trying to think, then realised I had no choice. "We'll go out by the front, then," I said. Stooping, I searched for a moment along the sandy floor, then found a pile of fresh excrement and hastily but thoroughly smeared it over Redhead, especially her feet, which were bare.

Knife in hand, I led her cautiously around the rough circle of the streambed, keeping close to the walls, and into the narrow entrance gully. When we were close to the wall of fire, guarded by its lone sentinel, I stopped and told the girl what I wanted her to do, my voice shielded by the crackling of the flames.

I turned for a last look behind me, at the bluff now over a hundred yards away where Grant knelt, poised, I hoped, with an arrow on his string, then started toward the sentry.

The fires were burning bright and lively and the Ugly sat before them, blinking into the darkness beyond, where on occasion luminous eyes glowed and muffled rumbling growls burst from huge beasts stalking the fresh scent, stopped outside by the universal fear of fire. At the moment the night was quiet, and the Ugly was dozing slightly before his fires.

That sixth sense possessed by wild creatures and primitive people warned him of impending danger and he aroused,

turning with a sudden snarl of awareness to confront me.

"Run, Red!" I snapped, and attacked.

The beast sprang to meet me, claws extended, his snarling mouth opening to bellow a warning to his sleeping tribe. The Redhead streaked by him, as close to the wall as she could get, and vaulted the fire. I steeled myself, gathering all my nerve, and with my knife in my hand and my heart in my throat I ran straight at the crouching beast, directly into the hold he wanted. The long arms reached out to greet me, the claws biting deep into the flesh of my shoulders, and the Ugly drew me toward those glistening fangs.

With both arms clamped to my shoulders he had no means of protecting himself. He started his bellow, and made an awful sound in the still of the night, but then my knife plunged to the hilt in his unprotected throat and the cry was choked off short.

The damage was already done. With the quickness of wary animals the beasts around the fire rose to their feet, swiftly located the cause of the commotion and came charging to their comrade's aid.

I pulled my knife free of the Ugly's throat and let the dying creature drop, to hang suspended by his arms. I had to take both hands to pull the embedded claws from my shoulders. When I was free of the dead weight I had only time to jump the fire and turn to face the beasts before the leaders reached the flames and were springing over them.

The first one never made it. An arrow pierced him from back to stomach as he jumped and he collapsed in mid air, falling dying into the flames. There was a swift flare and a terrible stink of burning hair.

I was set for the second one and ripped out his bowels. The next nearest one had not reached the fire when an arrow skewered him in the neck. During the short breathing spell I turned and ran for my life.

The Redhead had climbed the bank at the first possible point. I went up it far faster than she, and had made only a few steps toward the hill when I caught up with her stumbling in the darkness. "This way," I panted, and taking her hand I ran toward the top of the hill, but at an angle that would afford us easy climbing. Grant, who had seen our ascent of the gully wall, met us half-way down. He took one searching look at Redhead, handed me both our bows and

quivers and with one easy motion swept the girl into his arms and cradled her like a baby. Without any words spoken we began to run, angling back toward the trail.

Behind us the sounds of pursuit grew louder. The beasts had lost the scent where we climbed the wall, but swiftly found it and scrambled up after us. Once on the level ground they bayed questioningly for a few seconds, then found the trail and came hurtling after us.

"That stream we passed about a mile back," I gasped to Grant. "Lose the scent."

He nodded without answering. The Redhead was a tall, sturdy woman, a burden even to his magnificent strength. He altered his direction slightly, to hit the stream at the nearest point. He needed no guidance. We made excellent time, and when we reached the stream bed, though Grant was almost completely winded, we had lost the sound of our pursuers.

Grant stood Redhead on her feet and paused, his breath coming in great heavy gasps. The girl and I waited until he should recover his wind, and I used the time to encircle her waist with the rope and tie it roughly in the centre, leaving two free ends for myself and Grant. I handed one end to him and the blond giant swiftly understood and grasped it. When his breathing eased he led the way into the water. Holding my end of the line, the girl between us, I followed.

After a few minutes of stroking Grant paused and let the current carry us along. The stream was fairly swift, and we moved along at a good clip. After about a mile the water grew shallow and we had to walk on the sandy bottom. A little further on we ran into a rock outcropping extending into the water and Grant decided to leave the stream, since the rock would leave no traces and very little scent.

The rock carried us about five hundred feet before it sank into the ground and we had no choice but to resume walking on the soil. We had barely started trotting again when we heard behind us, high and clear in the cool evening air, the hunting bay of the Uglies.

Grant quickened his pace without comment.

Redhead was running with us now. Grant was not sufficiently recovered to carry her. "They're probably just running down the sides of the creek," I said encouragingly to the girl. "They aren't likely to find our tracks."

A few minutes later I knew I was wrong. Our trip in the water had washed most of the dung off our feet and clothes,

making us easier to detect, and the scent on the rocks was so fresh the Uglies had caught it.

The howling behind us grew louder by the minute, but it was obvious to Grant's trained ear that not more than a half-dozen of the big beasts were on our trail. I saw him glance sharply at Redhead. She was already stumbling with fatigue. We would have to find a shelter soon and make a stand.

It was only a minute more before we saw it. Ahead of us there was a level stretch of ground, open and unbroken, clear in the starshine. A hundred feet from where we stood a clump of rocks loomed black against the night. Grant led the way past them on the right, not fifty feet away, then swiftly doubled back to their protecting shelter.

We had barely time to put arrows to our strings before the Uglies came into sight, two of them running on all fours, following the trail, three more trotting upright behind them.

"Don't miss," Grant muttered to me, and slowly tensed his bow. When the animals were at the closest point on the false trail he whispered, "Take the nearest one," and I heard his bowstring twang. Before the sound died I had released my own arrow. My long hours of practice paid off. Both arrows found a victim; two Uglies were suddenly grovelling on the ground, biting and tearing at the wood protruding from their sides. The three remaining ones milled about a moment in confusion, uncertain of the direction of attack, and the lost time gave us the chance to aim and fire again.

Grant's was true to the target, and now only two Uglies still stood. My own whistled harmlessly by the head of a growling beast, and now the animals' sharp sense of smell had picked up our scent, and with spine-chilling howls the two remaining members of the band charged the rocks, dodging and jumping as they came.

There was time to nock and fire once more, and both of us loosed arrows, but in the dim light the bounding, moving bodies were an impossible target. Before we could draw another arrow the beasts were on us.

Grant, a knife in each hand, had little trouble with the one who attacked him. He countered the reaching claws with a knife slash that laid open the hairy arm, dodged a second bull-like rush and the grasping arms and followed the animal closely enough that when it turned to charge again he was upon it. One knife went stabbing home into the broad chest even as the animal grasped him with one

sharp claw. The other he jabbed straight into the gaping maw that was reaching for his throat.

I did not fare as well. My thrust at the throat missed and the sharp fangs clamped into my arm, causing me to drop my knife. I went down before his heavy weight, fighting desperately to keep the snapping jaws from my throat. Redhead, not lacking in courage, had seized a rock and stood poised, ready to brain the animal if she had the chance.

Grant moved forward smoothly, knife in hand, stood over our battling forms. He ended the uneven fight by one swift, accurate jab in the side of the neck.

I pushed the dying animal off my chest and got shakily to my feet. My arm was dripping blood from numerous cuts and punctures by the sharp canine teeth. Grant seized my arm and checked me over quickly. "Let it bleed for a few minutes before you bind it up," he said.

We moved out of sight of the dead Uglies and sat and rested. The sun made a lessening of the darkness noticeable in the Eastern sky. There was only the drip and spatter of the blood running off my arm to break the silence.

"That's enough!" Redhead said, sounding near hysteria. "We can't let him bleed to death!"

Grant was silent as he watched her improvise a rough bandage from his shirt and bind my wound. She was correct in saying I could not afford to lose any more blood, but what she didn't know was that the bite of any carnivore is apt to be poisonous, due to the accumulation of rotten meat scraps between the teeth. Very often the difference between life and death lay in whether or not the wound became infected.

When we were ready again Grant led us swiftly along the inside shoulder of a shallow roll in the land, heading back for the main trail at a point several miles above the Uglies' campsite.

I was having a hard time of it. Already exhausted, the drain on my strength from the shoulder wounds received in the first fight and my mangled arm was overwhelming. It took all my willpower to force my tired feet to move. I still had my senses about me, however, and when I realised Grant meant to lead us directly to the trail I spoke up.

"Grant," I gasped, and stopped.

The two others turned and waited. "Grant, we ought to stay away from the trail. This was the first batch going

through, but the odds are ten to one there'll be a couple of more parties coming through now."

Grant thought it over. "You're right, Shrimp. We'll parallel the trail from here to the pass and I'll scout ahead there until we know it's safe."

By the time we reached the plateau I was done, and I knew it.

When I proposed that they go on without me and send back a search party Redhead was instantly indignant. "Do you think we'd leave you now, Andy? Grant can go after some more men. I'm staying with you."

Grant only looked disgusted. "You know damn well you couldn't get those fish to venture out of the walls when the wolves are trekking, Shrimp," he said brusquely.

"Then you two go ahead and let me rest today; I'll come on in tonight," I said, knowing my weak voice made me a liar even as I spoke. For answer Grant walked to me, picked me up as easily as he had Redhead, and started across the plateau, leaving the girl to follow as best she could.

Grant carried me for the full mile across the plateau, and when we reached the rocky wall of the mountains he sat me down carefully in a rockfall and left Redhead to guard me while he scouted the pass.

He had an all too good example of the wisdom of my advice. There was a party coming through the pass when he reached it.

Grant told me later that he crouched behind a boulder, not a hundred feet from the shuffling, grumbling throng of Uglies, mates and cubs, and watched them file out of the pass and down the trail. He was taking a bad risk, since he was within easy scenting distance, but he had been that close when the first Ugly emerged into the open and he was unable to retreat without being seen.

He returned to the rockfall and told us what he had seen. We waited there while he climbed a nearby high rock and gained a view of the trail where it vanished over the edge of the plateau a mile away. When the last struggling animal had disappeared into the hollow he led us, partially rested, back to the pass.

It was again necessary to leave us while he ventured through the defile alone, but this time he encountered no enemies, and from the inside edge he could see far enough

down the trail inside the valley to know that it would be clear for at least an hour.

Now that we were out of danger, at least for the moment, something I had noticed the night before returned now to bother me. Grant had left his knapsack and we were eating while we waited, which perhaps was what brought the dormant memory alive.

"That fruit, or whatever it was the old Ugly threw to you last night," I said to Redhead. "Was it good food?"

She looked startled for a moment, then her face cleared. "I had forgotten about that, Andy. It was a large nut with a tough outer shell, like nothing I've seen before, and it was delicious. It was light, it couldn't have weighed more than a couple of pounds, but there was a tremendous amount of white nutmeat inside and it was very filling. One half of one was all I could eat."

"I saw that Ugly get those from one of the large bags. Is that what they carry in them?"

"Yes, mostly. They must grow wild somewhere in the South, and the Uglies carry a big supply of them when they start North. That was the main thing they ate last night. They did very little hunting along the trail."

Grant returned and there was no further time for talk. On my feet again, I hobbled through the pass behind them. Once out of the narrow defile we left the trail and took to the woods.

Here Grant knew the country intimately. Before the sun reached midday he had led us to the fort's small back gate, where a single shout would bring us swift admittance.

However, there would have been no one there to answer our shout. While we stood in the edge of the woods, tasting and feeling our safety, there was a thin, screaming sound above our heads, a sound which swiftly grew louder. Seconds later, scanning the skies with shaded eyes, we saw the ship coming down, silver-bright and beautiful in the crisp air, riding the path to land on a horse of flame.

It landed directly in front of the main gate. Our old ship, wrecked though it was, reared far above the twenty-foot stockade walls. This newcomer was smaller, brighter, with slim, delicate lines, obviously capable of atmospheric operation.

The stockade gate opened and people poured fourth in a rushing stream even before the ground had time to cool and the grass fires go out. There was no doubt in any-

one's mind that this was the long-awaited rescue ship, this was the answer to a million fervent prayers, this was salvation.

I looked at the ship and felt sick.

"They came—now that we're back," whispered Redhead tautly in the hush that had enveloped us.

Grant said nothing. I knew what he was thinking. I felt the same way.

"We might as well join them," said Grant finally, and his voice was toneless and dead.

We walked around the fort walls to the front. By the time we reached the open area between the fort and the ship the ground was alive with the shoving, shouting, jubilant colonists. We stood at the edge of the crowd, the girl who was the first woman lost to the Uglies ever to return, and the two men who had brought her back, and we were almost unnoticed.

We went quietly inside the fort and to the doctor's quarters in the ship. They were as deserted as the rest of the fort, but since the doctor was only a very little better qualified to practice medicine than a Hunter anyway, Grant removed Redhead's bandage and doctored my arm and shoulders as well as the inadequate medicine supply allowed.

Redhead stayed until the fresh bandage was on my arm and Grant was doctoring his own wounds, then said, "I'm beat, men. Done in. I'm going home and to bed. Tomorrow, when I'm back to my senses, I'll try to thank you two properly for what you did."

She turned and walked out, almost staggering from exhaustion, but still to my eyes the prettiest woman in the colony. I wasn't feeling much better but there was something I had to know before I could sleep. With Grant half-supporting, half-carrying me, we staggered down the corridor to the airlock and out into the compound. The people were gathered inside now and a semblance of order had been restored. Only three men had left the ship, and they seemed oddly out of place among the rough-hewn, ill-clothed throng about them. They were all three small, the largest no taller than myself, and the resplendent blue uniforms they wore did not lend them height or stature. Captain Jamie, second generation man, did not loom much larger as he stood beside them, but his son and the future

Captain, standing by him, towered over them by a head. The average man in the crowd about them stood six inches taller.

Captain Jamie, by dint of bellowing commands at the top of his powerful lungs, finally got the people quieted down. As soon as the noise subsided sufficiently for his somewhat weak voice to be heard the leader of the three spacemen mounted a hastily brought chair and addressed the crowd.

What he said, in short, was that he had no room on his small scout for a single extra passenger, but he would see that their plight was reported to the proper authorities when he reached his home base and steps would be taken to remove them from this rough and inhospitable world. He told them honestly that this would take several years. In the meantime, he would leave them ammunition for their long unused weapons, and such power tools as he could spare.

We turned away from the crowd and Grant helped me to my parents' quarters. We would have a little time, then. Grant and myself, and Redhead, and others among the young people who wanted to turn off the distress signal and forget our homeland, forget the crowded, gloomy cities, the artificial lives led by the habit-bound, pleasure-seeking people of Mother Earth. We had a world of our own here, and it was a good one. We had barely touched the surface of what this planet had to offer. With a little help from Earth in the matter of weapons and power equipment, we could expand out over the face of this bountiful world, wiping out the Uglies and claiming it for humanity. As a hundred other planets had done before us, we could relieve the crowded conditions on Earth a little by opening the doors to other people who were tired of the mechanical comforts of civilisation and wanted a life where a man had room to breathe.

With a small pang I remembered that we were even now facing a temporary shortage of food, and that our swelling population had made certain the crop we had planted was going to be inadequate. At the same time something clicked in my brain with a snap I could almost hear, something that had been bothering me since I first saw the hairy nuts. There was a report in the records, one made by the first generation over fifty years ago, of an expedition that had

gone through the South Pass and explored the wooded hills beyond. They had penetrated farther than anyone had gone since, and seen many strange and wonderful sights, but found nothing particularly useful. One of their discoveries was an immense grove of short, stunted trees, a grove which covered many thousands of acres of hilly land . . . and I remembered now the description they had recorded of the trees. They were short, twisted—and furry.

There, before our eyes all these years, if we had had the wit to see it, was the explanation of the Uglies' annual migration. When the nuts ripened in the spring they came South through the pass and lived for the summer months on the succulent meat that was theirs for the taking. Lazy and shiftless creatures, they returned to the hard hunter's life on the Great Plain only after all the nuts had dropped and rotted.

With the weapons the scout ship would leave us we could make an expedition in force and secure enough of the tasty nuts to tide us over the short season. In the future they would serve as a welcome addition to our annual food supply.

I realized, with a sudden quick lift of the heart, that I now possessed a valuable weapon in the fight that was to come, the weapon of virtual manna of food to folk all too accustomed to doing without. With groves as large as the expedition reported, and probably more such groves not yet discovered, we could easily feed our population.

In the time before the first ship arrived we could wipe out the Uglies as an important force and expand the stockade into a real city. When the ship came I had a feeling that very few of the younger people would give up the only home they knew and return to crowded Earth. It would take re-education, and that was where people like myself and Grant came in, but it could be done.

My family was still outside in the milling crowd about the spacemen. I collapsed into a chair and Grant turned to go. He hesitated, turned back and said "Shrimp . . . whoever Redhead chooses—we've got too much work to do from now on to be anything but friends."

I stuck out a hand and he clasped it hard, then walked away. The sunlight striking his blond hair as he stepped out the door was the last thing I saw that day.

Joseph Green

To the natives, the Star was god, only appearing once a year at the time of their annual pilgrimage. Sometimes, however, the god sent gifts to his subjects.

WALK TO A STAR

by COLIN DENBIGH

A chain of seven figures, linked hand by hand, stood blackly against a purple sky. They waited, feet planted in coarse sand, ankles washed by a live lapping ocean.

The sky lightened, and the tall centre figure loosed his right hand and pointed. Across the whispering deeps he pointed, to a speck above the horizon.

"There!" he breathed. "He sees us."

Dimly, a few degrees above the black rim of the world, a tiny star had risen. It faded as they watched, erased by the spreading dawn.

It was gone. Their gaze dropped back across the waves to their feet, foam streaked by the receding tide.

Ev, the tall one, led them across the beach to the forest edge, their feet slapping on the sand.

"He was there," said Har, when they found the small flame.

Ev squatted on the dark earth and stirred the smouldering leaves with a twig. The others sank down too, circling the fire.

"Our Creator does not forget us," said Ev to old Har, the other male.

The five females nodded silently, waiting for Ev to speak again.

Hunched over the pleasant warmth and smell of hissing leaves and branches, he dug his broad blunt nails into the

damp earth, savouring the texture. He held out the handful of soil and rubbed it between thumb and fingers.

"See this dirt? Star our Creator made it." He looked at the weathered face of Old Har. "This dirt is sand and dead things. Our bodies grow from it but our spirits come from Star. When our spirits go back He puts our flesh back in the dirt to make new trees, new bodies. As new bodies begin to grow He sends back our spirits for them."

Ev let the soil fall bit by bit back to the earth. It was tiring to use so many words.

"Truly, these things are wonderful," agreed Har.

"That is so," said Ev. He thought of the many other times he had led the People to that place to be seen by Star. When the big red flower opened on the tree-with-good-berries it was time to show themselves. Star the Creator needed to know how many spirits to send across the sky.

"I remember many times," sighed Old Har, "when I led the People here. When you were too small to leave the village, Ev."

"Now I am a man," declared Ev with pride. "You will be too old next time. No more spirits will come to your woman."

Har looked at his woman, Big. Gone the fine strong body, smooth and fat. Now she looked back from wrinkled eyes, grey streaked hair glinting in the shadows. He laid his hand on the roughness of her lean thigh.

Big looked from her man to Ev, and when Ev nodded she spoke, her words tired and slow.

"Long ago was my first walk. That time the Star looked into my belly and sent a spirit. It was Dan, who was eaten by the fish-with-teeth. He was a good boy. He had nice brown hair."

The younger women nodded, wondering what spirits might be sent to them. Bad Eye, her stomach already swollen with a child, spat into the fire and watched the sparks drift upwards through the branches.

"Star sent no spirit for the next one. It was born dead."

"He is wise," said Har. "He decides who shall live."

"Then there was Lad who made things. He took his woman into the wild places and was eaten by animals."

"He stole my woman, Happy, and we fought," remembered Ev. "I hit him with the stone-on-a-stick which he had made. The blood ran from his head"

The others, even Big, bent forward to listen. It was a great story and they never tired of hearing it.

"Tell us how it was," prompted Old Har.

Ev stared into the glowing embers, thick black brows creased in concentration. Deep among old memories he probed, seven walks before. He lived the episode again in his mind.

"He was not content with Blue Eyes, the woman with a good face. He wanted another." The strong jaws and fists clenched tight, ready to bite and strike the image of Lad, his old rival.

"He said nice things to Happy when I slept. She went with him and Blue Eyes into the forest. I reached out in my sleep for her but she was not there, so I awakened."

"A-a-h," sighed Flower, the youngest. She shook her yellow hair and the dawn light lay trapped and gleaming in the strands.

"I took my big spear and a nut of water and tracked them into the forest. Lad was clever—he left no marks, but the women had knocked leaves from the bushes.

"When I found them the sun was high. I sprang out and the woman Happy was afraid and hid behind Lad. Blue Eyes ran into the trees."

He raised twisted hands and clawed at the rising smoke, drifting sinuously, womanlike, into the trees.

"I threw the spear but Lad was too quick." His voice rose to a cracked speech. "It hit Happy between the breasts."

Ev looked down at the fire. Little blue flames flickered and vanished—like dead eyes. His muscles relaxed.

"The point came out of her back as much as my two hands wide."

Har was nodding to himself, deep in the story.

"What happened then?"

"He jumped at me with his weapon, the stone-on-a-stick. I caught his wrist and we fell together, fighting. He bit my face. Look!"

As he held back the thick hair they gasped in feigned horror. A bald, jagged pit puckered the jaw angle and was topped by half a shrunken serrated ear.

"His teeth were big and sharp, but they did not find the place where blood runs quickly."

"And then?" Har's old eyes were alight with interest.

"I hit where he is a man and he dropped his weapon. I snatched it and struck his head. He rolled back without a sound. I jumped up to hit again but his eyes were turned up and the blood ran into the grass. Then I left them. Animals were growling in the forest, they could smell meat."

The listeners slumped with a long hiss of breath. Eyelids tightly shut they held on to the pictures Ev had made with his words.

"And what happened to Blue Eyes?" It was Flower, she had not heard the tale as often as the others.

"I was too weak to follow. The hole in my face hurt. No one saw her again but some woman's bones were found near the village many days after. Perhaps she tried to come back. The bones had tooth marks."

Big stretched and left the fire to get food from their store. She returned with meat and fruits. With sharp nudges from her calloused feet she roused the other women. Bad Eye rose with a muttered curse, pausing only to spit at the fire. Red uncoiled with the slow grace of a reptile, shapely muscles rippling under her shiny skin, her hair like a captive sunset. She was second only to Flower in Ev's affections. Whisper, as was usual, got up without a word, her flat face inscrutable. Only Flower remained seated. Big was careful not to touch her. Ev could be harsh, often violent, where his favourite was concerned. The others accepted it. It was the way with men. They had had their turns. Flower would be ousted in time by some new favourite.

The meat and fruit were laid together in slices, rolled in leaves and plastered with clay. Big raked open the fire and arranged the seven bundles like a star. Over them the embers were replaced and a great heap of dry wood built into a cone. Hungry tongues of flame licked in among the branches, cracking them to squeeze out their resinous juice.

While the others gathered wood Ev took Flower by the hand and led her back to the beach. An expanse of fresh wet sand lay dazzling under the new risen sun. Together they waded out until the wave tops slapped Ev's belly and each swell lifted the girl's breasts. Ev scooped up handfuls of water to splash his face and eyes. Soon the grim lines had gone, washed away, and he turned to grin at Flower, his white teeth flashing from the dripping beard.

When the food was ready Har took his shell and blew into it until it moaned like wind in the mountain caves. Ev and Flower came running through the trees, shouting with laughter.

The clay bundles were too hot to touch with their hands. They prodded with sticks until the outer shells fell apart, releasing spurts of aromatic steam. Saliva gleamed on their hungry mouths.

Bad Eye sucked air through the side of her mouth to cool the meat held gingerly between her teeth.

"M-m-m! It's good. Perhaps we catch more on the way back." Her one good eye sparkled with pleasure as she looked from the food to Ev. "You are a great hunter, Ev. Without you we would be eating berries and beetles."

Ev grinned. Gravy trickled into his black beard.

"Uh-huh!" he grunted, swallowing until he could speak. "We could always eat Red. She has much good meat on her."

"Could you!" Red shouted in mock annoyance. "Who then would keep you warm at night when the cold winds come?"

Ev turned as the others laughed—saw the look Flower was giving him under her long lashes. He smiled to himself but said nothing.

"She is right," snapped Bad Eye with sudden venom, "but she is only good for warming beds!"

Food forgotten the two women sprang to their feet, legs braced and fingers hooked, but before they could close Ev was between them.

"Sit and eat!" he shouted. "Pray that the Star forgives you both or He will send snake spirits into your bellies. Soon we must start on the walk back and all must be strong."

The forest seethed with a turmoil of life. Its own vegetable life whispered and rustled in youth, rattled and creaked in gnarled age. Parasites clicked and hummed in every cranny; crawled on the leaves; sucked up the sap; bit and stung every moving thing. Larger ones chewed and pecked and were themselves torn and devoured by the slinking, crouching, springing creatures.

Through the vine tangles and knife-edged leaves the seven filed, alert with stonewood spears, caution in every step.

On the fourth day, Ev signalled a sudden halt. They were deep in an overhung gully. Blood flowers bloomed everywhere. Hook spiders crouched in their funnel webs.

"S-s-sh! Be ready." He crouched with his spear gripped in both hands.

The others closed up, formed a ring prickling with spears. Har snatched up a jagged rock, poised it with bent arm. He dug his spear butt into the grit, the point angled outwards.

With a high rasping shriek the bushes exploded and from them catapulted a huge swooping shape, a black hideous mass bristling talons and agape to sieze flesh in its yellow tearing fangs.

"Uh! Uh!" Har swung the rock, his old sinews whipping like thongs in a spring trap. It hit the beast in mid spring. Smashed into the yawning mouth.

In the same instant Ev, Big, Bad Eye and Whisper leapt beneath it. Their spears were struck butt down into the dirt, their bodies flattened.

The lion-that-climbs crashed down, impaled upon the spikes. Its death screams rent the air, its claws tore ruts in the ground where bodies had been half a second before.

Ev and the women rolled over and over and were still clambering to their feet as Har and the girls, Flower and Red, closed in. They lunged with their spears, drove them into the great yellow eyes.

With his club Ev hammered the shafts into the animal's brain. It was dead. The jaw dropped shut, the talons stretched their last and shrank into the horny pads.

Then they relaxed. Har brought out his fire bow and twirled the rod against the block until smoke spurted out. The others skinned and butchered the carcass, cutting out the spears as they worked.

"Good meat!" smiled Ev, pausing to suck his red, dripping fingers and lick the stone knife. "It will make us fierce and strong."

As the strips of meat hung sizzling from a pole across the fire they danced to mark their success. Har blew the shell while Ev led the women, stamping and chanting round the smoke.

Later, as they marched on through the forest, Ev yelled and shook his spear at the prowling beasts scenting the meat carried in the lion skin.

"A-a-gh! Get back! We are People and not afraid of you!"

It was nearly dark when the last bushes parted to show the village fires flickering through the stockade. They were home.

Inside the long communal hut Ev sensed a tension, dark and nervous. He looked at the crowd of elders and children. Light from the flickering torches revealed faces like totems, worn and pitted with shadow. He watched the hooded eyes of Old Sim, the Chief. Saw nothing but a leathery network of age and suffering. The eyes glinted red in the torchlight.

Ev looked from Sim to the others. The very old and the very young. Eighteen children of whom several would be mating in a walk or two. And Five elders including Sim and another man, bent and blind. They were tense, all of them.

"My nose and spirit tell me something has happened." Ev looked at Sim as he spoke. "Better to tell it now."

Sim weighed his words with care. Watched their effect closely.

"It is something that will make you angry, but hear me first."

"So be it," nodded Ev.

"There came a man we believed dead. A man who should have been dead. He was no ghost but flesh and bones. He was scarred in the head from a bad wound."

Ev stared wildly around him, his face pale against the matted beard. His fingers crept to the stone knife in his belt.

"You have guessed who it was. Now listen to me, Ev. Listen hard." He raised his thin yellow hands and pointed where the sea lay beyond the forest. "Our Creator did not wish Lad to die. He sent back his spirit. It is the will of the Star."

"But his body? It was broken!"

"Blue Eyes went back and bound his head. She fought off the animals that smelt blood."

"And why does he come here? Why now? Seven walks have passed since we fought."

Sim gestured with his hands, encompassing all the occupants of the hut. His voice was soft, and carried the quiet

authority of the infinitely wise from whom Nature has no secrets.

"We are his people, Ev. He is one of us. He and you are both sons of Har—who is my last living son. Those who bore you were sisters, Big and the brave Ti who fought with a snake to save another child and died."

The Chief looked into the smoke-blackened roof beams and saw there the faces of the dead ones, among them Ti, more beautiful than in life. Sim never spoke of them. The others would not have understood.

"Ev, it is wrong for one of us to dwell apart from his people, among the animals. So few of us are left. There is one now where ten were before. And in the old times when People were great their numbers were as the lights-in-the-sky. You are the only grown man not too old to hunt and make children. What if you die? It will be two or three walks before the young ones look at the Star. We need Lad as he needs us."

"But he stole my woman Happy!" Ev forced the words through clenched teeth. "She died because of him."

"There were few grown women then." Sim looked at Ev's four mates. "You had three and Lad only one. That was not right, but you were older and stronger. Now you have two more to take Happy's place."

Ev lowered his shaggy head. "You are right. But if he comes back, what then?"

"He will not do wrong again. He has a fine gift for you, a stone-on-a-stick better than the one he made here. He will not go near your women. Blue Eyes is still with him and there are young ones, also."

"Oh? Where are they?"

"I will tell you when you have promised to forgive him."

Through Ev's mind passed the pictures of his early life. He was throwing his first spear—a little thing his broad man's hand could have snapped like a twig. Watching as he threw was a small boy, Lad, gaping with admiration for his strong half brother. Then he was older, fighting for his life in the coils of a strangler fish. Beside him Lad, hacking at the slimey arms like a demon. He saw himself slithering flat across the swamp-that-swallows. His arms were stretched,

his fingers strained to grip Lad's hands and drag him from the slime. But then he saw the blood running from his hated rival's head while Happy lay beside him, pierced by his own spear, and he groaned aloud.

As the nightmare faded from his eyes Ev looked up. His gaze was level and calm.

"I promise," was all he said. A deep sigh of relief escaped the others.

A small fire glowed in Sim's long hut. The smoke drifted up through the roof vent. The shadows lay thick and dense behind Ev, seated on the floor. He stared through the smoke at the open door. At his left was Sim, on his right the sightless Con, head bent to feel about him with ear and nose.

Suddenly, a shape blocked the night sky in the doorway. With a tread so light that only Con heard it above the singing fire, a man ducked inside and sank down before them.

Ev strained forward, narrowed eyes stabbing at the figure opposite. His teeth bared with a sudden ferocity. Sim's biting grip on his thigh made him start. He relaxed, looked again.

The man crouched huge and expressionless. As tall as Ev and thicker, glistening serpents of muscle coiled about his massive body. Tangled hair hung from his head and jaw, curls covered the chest and abdomen. His legs were like trees. But his brown face marred him, drawn in at the brows by a livid scar that ran back into the scalp edged with silver locks.

"Lad," Ev breathed the name, almost to himself. He stared. A ghost from the mystery of death.

"Ev." The answer was a whisper.

Slowly their fingers reached out and clasped in the flame. Con smiled, he smelt the singeing hair from their hands.

"It has been a long time," said Ev, when the greeting had been made. He reached behind for a nut of fermented juice and passed it across the fire.

"Seven walks," Lad nodded. "Much has happened."

"Many of the old are gone now, many young ones have come from the Star."

"That is so." Lad waved behind him. "I too have young ones. A boy and two girls."

"But you have not been on the walk!" Ev looked at Sim, puzzled. "How can spirits have come to Lad's woman?"

"In the high place where we have been," answered Lad, "we could look over the roof of the forest to the sea. When you made the walk we, too, could see the Star."

"A-a-ah! The Star has good ways of thinking. He led you to such a place."

"It was so." The scarred brow frowned in thought. "Ev, I was wrong to take your woman. A devil came from the forest and lived in my head. When I looked at your woman the devil spoke to me. It said, 'Take that woman, she will be good for you.' It said, 'Ev is asleep, he will not hear, your feet are light—like dew on the grass.'"

"Yes," said Ev, gazing into the red eyes of the fire. "It would speak in that way."

"It said, 'Go quickly, when Ev awakes he will be angry, but you will be safe. Then you will have two women to make food, to make skins-to-wear, to make children.'"

"It was long ago," murmered Ev. "Say no more—it is forgotten. Sim has spoken words that made pictures in my head. Pictures of the People—once many, now few. We need you with us."

Sim looked from one lined face to the other. The scents of their strength, their thick hair, their sweat, were in his nostrils. Two fine men at the peak of life—all that were left of their generation. He saw in his mind strong bodies of twenty full grown males who shared the years of his own prime. Dead now. Killed by beasts, by sickness; swallowed in the terrible swamp; all dead but himself and blind Con.

"Soon there will be young women ready to mate," he told them. "Young boys are growing, too. If the Star preserves you both to guard us we may one day be great again. Remember, we are People, not beasts. Only our spirits come from Star the Creator, and it is his will that we live and grow." He paused to stir the fire, and they saw young flames still burning in the wrinkled hearth of his eyes. "I am very old now. I have had much time to think. This I know—the Creator has a purpose for our lives. Be strong and patient. In time the Star will make all things known."

They stared at the old man. His words were strange—their meaning beyond them.

Ev turned as though waking from a trance. He looked at his half-brother.

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"To remember this day, I have a gift for you. To make us one again." He turned and beckoned at the shadows behind him.

Into the firelight stepped Red.

"I give her to you because she is worth much to me," he said simply. "Take her, she has said that she will be good to you."

Lad lowered his head, his eyes wide at the woman's beauty.

"Thank you, Ev." To the girl he said, "I remember you from long ago. You were a child when I went into the forest. What do they call you?"

"Red. And I remember you. You were clever, and made things. You made me a toy from clay. You put it in the fire and it was made hard, and red like my hair."

"Yes, I remember." Smiling, he took the girl's hand and drew her down beside him.

"I, too, have a gift," he went on, opening a skin-wrapped bundle. "I made it from a stone I dug from the ground on the mountain. I give you this stone-on-a-stick, Ev, to mark this day. It is a good day, one to remember. We are together again."

Ev took the weapon and turned it over in his hands with wonder and admiration. The handle, carved from the toughest wood in the forest, was as long as his arm. But the stone set upon its end made his heart leap. It had a hole in which the stick fitted. It had been polished until it shone like sunlight in a pool after rain. One half was shaped marvellously to an edge too sharp to touch.

"A-a-ah! It is good," sighed Ev, his finger tips caressing the bright smooth surface. "Thank you, Lad—it is a strong weapon."

With delight he ran his thumb nail across the curved surfaces, and grunted with pleasure when it clicked across the beautiful pattern covering one side of it.

Eyes squinting, the stone held close to the fire, he copied the pattern in the dust of the dirt floor with his fingers.

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